The Everyday Ethics of Corporate Social Responsibility

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"Corporations shape human experience not only in spectacular and disastrous ways, but also in mundane, every day, ambivalent, and positive ways. They are, after all, the source of or conduit for much of what we wittingly and unwittingly produce and consume as we breathe, eat, drink, read, work, play, and move about the world... No human alive today is breathing air or drinking water that has not been touched by corporate action" [1].

As captured in the above quote, it is difficult to underestimate the influence of corporations on our everyday lives. People around the world are increasingly holding corporations accountable for their practices and seeking ways to rectify their unequal distribution of the risks and benefits among differently positioned populations. The contested field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) emerged as corporate leaders sought out ways to strategically manage their firms' relationships with society.

While it is tempting to treat CSR as a set of policies, I define it as a "dynamic and contested field of relational practice" in which corporate and other actors hold each other to account [2]. There is a grave danger in equating CSR *policies* with actual *practices*, as identified by a host of social scientific studies exposing the gap between corporate discourse and behavior. My book *Extracting Accountability: Engineers and Corporate Social Responsibility* shows that a company's public reputation, its environmental impacts, and its contribution to social wellbeing all emerge from the everyday decisions of the people who enact corporate forms through their everyday work, from executives to engineers. These decisions shape and are shaped by official corporate policies *along with* broader cultural discourses of responsibility, histories of corporate-community relations, and employees' own ethical frameworks. Far from being static, CSR is made—and remade—as engineers and others respond to calls for greater accountability, from concerns raised by neighbors at backyard barbeques to media exposés of ethical failings. This dynamic of holding-to-account and response happens internally as well, as employees attune their actions to the expectations of their coworkers and managers.

There is a fundamental tension between some sectors of the public asking corporations to "do more" and take on greater responsibility, on the one hand, and academic critiques that CSR ensconces the power of the private over the public sphere, on the other hand. At its core, CSR is a private form of governance that seeks to "do well" by the public while maintaining the profitability of corporations. Scholars critique CSR for shoring up the moral authority of corporations to present themselves as solutions to problems that they themselves define [3], [4]. In contrast with the principles of responsible research and innovation, for example, CSR does not provide satisfying guidance on how to "navigate power inequalities, divergent interests, and diverse cultures of communication and governance" [5]. As a case in point, while virtually all CSR discourses and practices uphold a commitment to "stakeholders," they generally leave corporations in charge of determining who a "stakeholder" is and determining the appropriate

methods for engaging them. In the mining and oil and gas industries, there is a history of corporations choosing to engage with "light green" environmental groups that are sympathetic to industrial activity rather than "dark greens" who are critical of capitalism [2], [6], [7]. The voluntary nature of CSR contrasts with more rights-based frameworks for regulating corporate practices: interacting with corporations as a "citizen" that bears particular rights, enforced by the government, is distinct from interacting with corporations as a "stakeholder" that has no particular levers to hold corporations accountable beyond public pressure.

While these features of the contemporary practices of CSR can fuel claims that the field is nothing more than disingenuous greenwash, my research demonstrates that CSR can be a resource for engineers and others seeking to reform the corporations employing them [2]. During my ethnographic research, I came to know engineers seeking to improve their companies' environmental and social performance. They were able to use the rhetoric of CSR to advocate for greater investments in community relations teams and more stringent environmental practices. John, for example, came to know well the people and places where his company was planning operations in his position as the point person for ensuring that they complied with the performance standards of the institutions financing their projects. To do that work, he had to make the case for greater social and environmental accountability among the operations teams that were designing the facilities. To do so, he showed how the performance standards lined up with the corporation's previously expressed CSR policies, in effect minimizing the sense that CSR was "external" to the company's own commitments.

MY BOOK ALSO shows, however, that the corporate context of engineers' work put them in the position of trying to reconcile multiple, sometimes competing accountabilities: to their employers, to their profession, to the public, and ultimately to themselves. Taking a pragmatic approach, they poured their efforts into what they called "win-wins": activities that would preserve their companies' profitability, uphold their personal and professional ethics, and provide economic benefits to the public while minimizing harm. While there is much to admire in their work, this pragmatism skirts crucial questions: Who gets to define what a "win" is? Wins for whom? Designing oil and gas well pads to be less obtrusive by using electric generators and putting up tall hay bale walls, for example, does not address the values of local residents who are opposed to fracking activities in their neighborhood at all. This compromise approach of CSR focuses corporate investment on activities that support the company's financial bottom line, sidelining those ethical obligations that do not. Corporate accountability, my ethnography suggests, would be more robust if engineers and others acknowledged the limits of "win-wins" and opened up space for the public to define for themselves what a good life is and how corporations can—or cannot—facilitate their flourishing.   ∎

■ References

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