

Experiencing CSR in Asia: A Social Media Perspective from the Outside In

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Abstract. This paper focuses on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as strongly linked to expectations for corporations in the cultural contexts in which they operate. Using an approach based in a macro-level for socio-technical design, it examines the interaction between digital activist efforts to (re)define CSR and corporate responses to these efforts. Two cases of interaction between stakeholders and corporations with activist interventions are examined. Findings demonstrate that this interaction around CSR is often indirect, and misses a critical interaction around contesting knowledge. This calls into question the viability of CSR practices mediated by policy and NGOs, because businesses appear to be simply adopting mediators' perspectives to avoid a crisis rather than building a strategy based on critical engagement with the issues.

Keywords: Socio-Technical Design, Culture, Knowledge.

1 Introduction

In Mumford's 2006 article on the past, present and future of socio-technical design, she focuses on core socio-technical values of prioritizing human needs and democracy as critical to future business models [1]. Human needs can be understood as part of CSR. Thus, we can understand her position in terms of the role of human needs in business models as socio-technical approach to CSR.

So why does CSR matter for our understanding of socio-technical design? Part of the answer lies in the expanding role and scope of technology use in daily life. Kampf [2,3] called for a re-framing of socio-technical design to include a macro-level of understanding beyond organizational contexts. This re-framing sets up macro social-technical design and CSR as both acting at the interfaces of business, technology and society. Adding a technology component to our social understanding of CSR offers us the chance to examine Internet supported communication processes in which stakeholders communicate with business about CSR, and businesses respond through adjustments to their strategy.

To examine these technology supported CSR communication processes, two cases documented on YouTube.com will be discussed. First, a 2013 case in which an activist organization influenced several clothing suppliers to stop using angora will be

introduced. Then an earlier, ongoing case in which employee wages and working conditions in South East Asia were protested by both European Activists and the workers themselves will be compared and contrasted with the angora case. These two cases together show a range of results emerging from Internet activism, which can be argued to have effects on both short and longer-term business strategy choices. These effects can be seen as a form of socio-technical (re)design at the macro level.

2 Method

The method is a multiple case study. The two cases were selected because they offered recent examples of companies altering their business strategies in response to online activism. These two cases come from the fashion industry. The combination of these cases demonstrates a range of business responses to online activism from adopting activist demands for short term action to re-envisioning their business strategy by including benefits to society as a primary goal for their organization.

This primary data is approached through a multidisciplinary model for socio-technical design at the macro-level [2]. It uses a “multidisciplinary lens combining socio-technical design, organizational theory and sociological concepts.” [2] This model is knowledge focused, looking at knowledge in terms of 1) The cultural production of new forms of knowledge [4]; 2) epistemic or knowledge producing circuits which form the basis for a knowledge producing culture [5]; and 3) active, contested knowledge processes [6].

Treating knowledge as the focus for examining the intersection of business and society reveals the cultural pressures to which companies respond [7]. Understanding these cultural pressures in terms of their potential effects on both knowledge about an issue and business strategy adjustments in response reveals a part of the interface between business and society as socio-technical space of negotiation.

3 Two Cases of Digital Activism about CSR and Corporate Responses

Both CSR and macro socio-technical design can be understood as affecting and reflecting surrounding cultural contexts by addressing norms and values. These cases demonstrate the effects of using knowledge underlying value choices to attempt to reframe norms for both consumer behavior and corporate strategy.

3.1 PETA Condemning Angora through a Viral Video, Blogs, and Media

In the first case, a non-profit organization called People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) posts a viral video about the treatment of rabbits whose fur is used for angora sweaters. The video went viral, and several companies in the clothing industry removed angora sweaters from their racks, and offered to refund any recently purchased angora sweaters.

PETA is a non-profit 501c(3) organization founded in 1980. PETA's mission is to support animal rights, and it targets factory farms, laboratories, the clothing trade and the entertainment industries. [8]. Since 1980, PETA has been legally engaging with corporations and research institutions around animal rights, and promotes a vegan diet and cruelty free consumer practices as cultural values.

The organization has expanded globally from a small US based activist group established in the 1980s, and currently claims to have over 3 million members worldwide, with sections in South America, Europe and Asia. [9].

The organization is funded by individual and corporate donations, and features logos of corporate donors on their website. On their donations page, PETA implies that association with them is a way to advertise your cruelty free corporate practices. Yet, on the page where donors are recognized, PETA posts a disclaimer stating that they are not responsible for the actions of their donors, and donations do not necessarily mean an organization has PETA's approval.

PETA engages in the cultural practice of presenting online videos of product production practices that PETA claims hurt animals. The videos are shown from a covert perspective, emphasizing the negative effects of these practices on animals. In addition to the video, PETA uses their website to advertise and organize protests that challenge conventional knowledge about clothing retailers.

One example was a protest by returning stuffed rabbits with red paint on them to the retailer, the GAP. These stuffed "bloody" rabbits are meant to represent rabbits treated cruelly in the production of angora [10].

PETA also uses discourse that challenges common knowledge about producing products from animals. This discourse is based on terms such as "cruelty-free" that highlight production processes, which are, in contrast to their label, not cruelty free. Examples are in this case, the production of angora, or in other cases the use of animals in cosmetic testing, and pharmaceutical science. PETA has been using this discourse since the 1980s to affect knowledge about the use of animals in products, which in turn attempts to reframe norms of consumer, producers and retailers related to animal rights. These norms include the use of animals for food as well, with PETA emphasizing a vegan lifestyle as part of their website.

The spreading of terms such as "cruelty-free" throughout the industries using animals in their products or production processes can be seen as a knowledge-producing circuit which brings awareness of industry practices to consumers. This awareness, in turn, encourages consumers to reconsider their norms and the connection between their norms and their purchasing habits. This encouragement is reinforced through the "Action" page on their website. The "Action" page offers several different issues related to animal rights, and names companies to which people can direct their protest action. One example of this is an "action -alert" on PETA's website naming Air France as an airline that carries monkeys for laboratory experiments as cargo. PETA calls for supporters to contact Air France and ask them to stop. [11]

PETA can be seen as trying to affect corporate strategy by telling both consumers and clothing producers which materials they should and should not use. In the case of "the angora rabbit cry heard round the world," PETA called for clothing manufacturers around the world to stop using angora by targeting retailers and asking them not to carry items containing angora.

Retailers responded in two ways—some of them announced they would stop using angora and refund angora products that were recently purchased, while others simply ignored PETA.

Consumers also made decisions about whether to ignore or engage in the practice of avoiding products with angora. But the media coverage ensured that regardless of reaction, their knowledge about how angora was produced was at least publically challenged, and possibly changed.

The PETA website is attached to several social media sites and an iPhone app, which viewers can use to further disseminate PETA's findings, stories of success and action campaigns. PETA USA has over 2 million "likes" on Facebook. [12], expanding the breadth of their knowledge producing circuit. They have 458 thousand followers on Twitter [13], and over 23,000 followers on Instagram [14]. These numbers show that social media can also be seen as part of the knowledge producing circuit.

In sum, PETA uses social media, their website, and traditional media to challenge knowledge about whether animals should be used in the production of products, and whether consumers should take animal cruelty into account when making purchasing decisions. In doing so, PETA has successfully affected the strategies of major clothing retailers who have chosen to stop selling products with angora in response to PETA's video and subsequent actions regarding the rights of angora rabbits. Thus, the combination of an activist group with an agenda that affects business practices—that of animal rights, is revealed through a viral YouTube video about angora rabbits with over 1 million views [15], and then discussed social media and consumer/retailer interaction reveal part of the interface between business and society. However, the retailer response to the issue is not to engage with it, but rather either ignore it or respond as PETA asks them too. This results in an interaction between PETA, corporations, and consumers that enables consumer engagement, but does not encourage corporate engagement around producing knowledge about the issue, but rather corporations that simply choose to comply or not with activists demands.

3.2 Southeast Asian Garment Worker Protests: Videos that Never Went Viral

In contrast to the PETA video and subsequent ability to change some industry practice at least at the retailer level, online protests both by activists and garment workers themselves have not resulted in viral videos or had enough media impact to change the practices. In this section, videos about garment workers that should also be emotionally moving and affect consumer perspectives are analyzed. So, why don't these videos go viral?

Frequently viewed videos are produced by independent media channels such as the Journeyman TV channel on YouTube [16]. Their videos include protests in Bangladesh, where the local police are using crowd control with nonviolent garment worker protests (over 8,800 views in the first day)[17]. This video has the potential to go viral because of the broader audience of the channel, which has about 240,000 subscribers. This video is also professionally produced and visually connects the global fashion industry with video footage of worker protests, in comparison with the amateur videos of protests and conditions posted by the workers or individual activists

supporting the workers. However, it still is not to viral status. This begs the question of what kinds of cultural practices affect clothing consumers ability to hear and be interested in the worker's plights in Asia?

In the YouTube forum, the main activists for garment workers are the workers and unions themselves. They work with amateur videographers to produce videos that explain their situation. These videos are documentary style, and show the workers protesting, as well as describe the conditions in which these workers are living. They also directly address both companies and consumers as an active part of their context. This choice of addressing the videos directly to the global consumer audience reflects an effort to become a publicly and commonly acknowledged part of the global fashion industry for consumers and companies. It also reflects the workers efforts to establish their working conditions as a concern that could affect consumer's purchasing choices.

An example of this type of video is titled "Cambodian Garment Workers seek support from Walmart, H&M shoppers" and in the first year it has been available on YouTube, it has only achieved about 3,200 views [18]. This video depicts garment workers speaking directly towards consumers. In the video, workers explain that the people who hired them supplied Walmart and H&M. When Walmart and H&M change their CSR policies to distance themselves from garment worker abuse by setting a no tolerance policy for subcontractors who do not comply with their CSR perspectives on worker rights [19], the result portrayed in the video is that owners of the subcontractor companies picked up and left overnight, the factories are closed, the garment workers are left unpaid, and homeless. They protest both towards industry and consumers, holding signs that depict different amounts of unpaid wages, representing several months to over a year which subcontractors for H&M and Walmart have not paid them. The video is intended to get consumers thinking about why they are able to buy such cheap clothes, and who is actually paying the true price of production.

This is one of several videos explaining the workers' perspectives on the factories and their role in the global fashion industry. These videos reveal an interface between business and society that connects garment workers in Asia with clothing consumers in Europe and North America. They work to change the knowledge of the costs involved in producing cheap clothes, and get consumers to question whether they want to buy products that are cheap because of worker exploitation. Thus, the videos are working to change consumer knowledge about garment production, the reasons behind the prices they pay for clothing, and the effects of global companies enforcing CSR policies which have an effect that is different than the intention of the company itself. Ironically, the voices of the garment workers addressing clothing retailers are less visible than PETA's angora rabbit. The Journeyman video [16] ends with footage of a garment working crying as she is treated for wounds from rubber bullets. Why is it that the cries of an angora rabbit are more easily heard on social media than the cries of an injured person?

In this case, the efforts to change:

1. what consumers know about the production of cheap clothing, and
2. what companies know about the effects of their CSR policies

represent another form of the cultural practice of revealing the effects of production. They reveal the negative side of CSR policies intended to protect workers rights by demonstrating their experiences, which, least in the short term, show that enforcing CSR policies about the supply chain by eliminating suppliers who do not comply results in hurting the garment workers they are intended to protect. However, these efforts trying to tell corporations how they are hurting garment workers in Asia appear to fall short. Not only are the companies not engaging with issue, but the media and social media are not able to support high level engagement yet either. It is possible that Journeyman's video will go viral in the coming months. At least YouTube is betting on it because it has added a requirement for the viewer to look at advertising before viewing the videos. But will this type of video and the questions it begs about the production of cheap clothing enable corporations, consumers, and garment workers in Asia to engage in building knowledge together at the interface of business and society?

4 Conclusions

These two cases—1) the PETA movement for animal rights to be considered in the production of products by corporations, and 2) the Garment workers in Asia—demonstrate social media as a virtual space that can reveal interfaces between business and society. In this space, traditional knowledge about products and considerations that consumers can make in their ethical choices related to purchasing productions is challenged. This space is contested, yet not used fully as a space for engagement about production issues that both affect and reflect the effectiveness and outcomes of company initiated CSR initiatives. In each case, activists work to redefine CSR. For PETA, CSR becomes focused on eliminating products whose production processes or materials involve any actions which can be understood as related to animal cruelty. In contrast, for the Asian garment workers, CSR emerges in a new form when they begin asking global companies to take responsibility to pay wages that their subcontractors have denied them due to the enforcement of CSR policies intended to protect garment workers in the first place. In both cases, industry appears to avoid engaging in the issue, only responding to social media and media pressures by either changing a visible practice, such as stopping the use of angora, or refusing to engage with the issue.

These cases call into question the viability of CSR practices mediated by policy and NGOs, because businesses appear to be simply adopting mediators' perspectives when the social media and media coverage appear to have the potential to affect their consumer base to avoid a crisis. As we apply the frame of socio-technical design to knowledge processes, such as the development of knowledge related to framing and defining CSR, the social issues inherent in CSR take on a new perspective through voices which are enabled and take on a new level reach with the technology of social media. However, the reach of social media is not only technical, but also social. Although any video has the potential to go viral, why do some videos, such as PETA's video about angora rabbits, go viral? Why do other videos with a case that

is just as compelling, such as the garment industry worker documentary videos, stay relatively unheard and unseen? Is it because of the strategies used by the video producers? Or is it mainly because of the social networks that have been built up over time which allow people to be open to some issues more than others? What role does a history of activism play in the ability for a video to go viral? Are activists and business competing for cultural resources—each trying to present a framework for understanding consumption and lifestyle which foregrounds their concerns? And, if so, does social media provide more of a covert game of tactics played out between activist groups and businesses vying to shape cultural practices of consumption? Will social media spaces such as YouTube enable a socio-technical redesign of CSR, as the technology is used to reveal and encourage engagement at the interface of business and society? These questions raise key issues about the nature of social-technical design at the macro-level. What is the balance between the social and the technical aspects of social media? Do current technologies, such as social media, enable engagement because of the speed in which they allow people to exchange ideas and replicate them through interpersonal networks? Or is engagement a social characteristic, which needs to come from the intentions and actions of consumers and corporations in their approach to creating cultural practices in and through social media?

Questions for further inquiry related to understanding CSR as it is played out in online web presences and social media include: Whether, and how social media can play a role in building strategies for corporations, communities, and governments based on critical engagement with the issues? And how can this produce a common understanding of CSR with multiple perspectives that engages issues affecting societies from global perspectives rather than being used as a form of risk avoidance or a platform for ideology? And can perspectives on CSR from the outside in, from NGOs or garment workers towards corporations, be integrated into corporate strategy at a deeper level than risk management?

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