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'SPIN WITH ETHICS'?: DISCOURSES OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The increasing reach and power of multinational corporations raises important questions about the tensions between local and global interests, values and practices. If the corporate social responsibility (CSR) theoretical 'debate' is articulated through two key discourses: broadly speaking, economic / commercial and moral / ethical, then how is it perceived by communication professionals in Southeast Asia with responsibility for CSR in their organisations or for their clients? Those two broad strands can be teased out to highlight the role of specific discourses that determine approaches to CSR in particular contexts. This paper is based on interviews conducted with public relations professionals in Singapore and Malaysia in 2006.

1. Introduction

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) emerges from both a Western intellectual tradition and a capitalist, economic framework. It is not surprising then, as Birch and Moon argue, that 'there is no single CSR formula or template for CSR worldwide' (2004:19). Rather, as Godfrey and Hatch (2007) suggest, there is a tension between the potentially conflicting discourses of moral philosophy and economics and this dichotomy is embodied in the ways communication professionals approach CSR.

This paper considers the responses of ten communication professionals in Singapore and Malaysia to questions about CSR practices and beliefs. We are not seeking to develop a new model for CSR but rather to consider the perceptions and understandings of CSR held by public relations practitioners, with the aim of identifying key themes important to an understanding of socially responsible business practices in a globalised world, and in particular in a Southeast Asian context. Our interest is how the perceptions of industry

practitioners may be used to develop a better understanding of CSR practice, and in turn inform the development of CSR theory. The interviews do not necessarily or obviously situate the interview participants as identifiably 'Malaysian' or 'Singaporean'. What their different orientations reveal is the sheer range of discourses at work (and in contest) in any discussion of CSR, and in particular, in contexts such as Malaysia and Singapore, which have distinctive societies, cultures, politics, and histories.

We write from an Australasian perspective, partly as our student cohort increasingly reflects, and indeed, demands a regional perspective and partly as our public relations colleagues in industry discover an increasing need to work with partners or regional offices in Asia. Our concern is to avoid imposing a thoroughly Western understanding of CSR on Southeast Asia, and to use Malaysia and Singapore as specific examples which allow us to consider the importance of context in relation to discursive practices. So, in part, this paper is an attempt to negotiate our position as Australian professional communication and public relations educators of both Asian and Australian students. Our aim is to question our own understanding of what it means for corporations to be socially responsible, precisely by exploring how this is perceived by individuals living and working in societies other than our own.

2. CSR: background

On one level, corporate social responsibility appears to be straightforward in terms of definition. A recent Australian government report defines CSR by its focus on 'the environmental and social impact of [an organisation's] conduct' and as 'tak[ing] responsibility for its [organisational] actions. (Commonwealth of Australia 2006:15) A Malaysian report, also released in the second half of 2006, defines CSR as 'open and transparent business practices that are based on ethical values and respect for the community, employees and environment' (The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants 2006:2). Each of these examples recognises a social obligation which extends beyond creating value or profit for investors, an obligation and at times an accountability to other (that is, non-investor) stakeholders, such as the community, a theme which resonates with (but is by no means exclusive to) contemporary public relations theory. In the same report, the chair of the Securities Commission in Malaysia views CSR as part of good risk management as 'CSR allows companies to maintain their "licence to operate"' (2006:40). Significantly, however, CSR is considered voluntary, in that CSR activities exceed mandatory legal requirements and regulations (Chapple & Moon, 2005:416). If CSR is an expression of 'the underlying implications of the term "social responsibility" that there is a specific obligation and a relationship in which there are reciprocal rights and duties' (L'Etang, 2006:408), then implicit in such an understanding of CSR is a strong sense of accountability to others, be they stakeholders, publics, society or the community. We would argue that in public relations, this

accountability, if it is to avoid charges of 'window dressing' (first levelled by Milton Friedman in 1970, but still echoing loudly today)[1] necessarily involves responding, answering or accounting to stakeholders (to others), a position which appears to be implicit in the understandings of CSR cited here.

While CSR is concerned primarily with the social obligations of corporations, there remains a difficulty in theorising the quite diverse business practices and activities which fall under this umbrella term.

CSR activity is not one comprehensive activity but rather a collective name for many different activities. For example, philanthropy and environmental remediation represent different *kinds* of social involvement, not merely different manifestations for a firm's commitment to its communities. … Further, the unique social benefits, or costs, of *particular* actions on *discrete* stakeholders get lost when these activities are aggregated in more global measures (Godfrey & Hatch 2007:88).

While Godfrey and Hatch suggest here the difficulty in marrying the different social activities and practices which could arguably be defined as CSR, L'Etang distinguishes between philanthropy and CSR, where the first is deemed 'generous charity' and the latter 'obligation and duty' (2006:408). Such a distinction is not always clear in the interviews we conducted, but may be important to consider when discussing the various perceptions of CSR activity by Singaporean and Malaysian professionals.

We view CSR as an important activity integral to public relations practice (see, for example, Daugherty 2001; L'Etang 2006), specifically as one that is premised on an understanding of ethics, and more importantly, on ethical relationships, as a process of communicative exchange. Thus, following Benhabib (1992); Young (1997); Walker (1998); and Surma (2006a), we prefer a communicative understanding of and approach to ethics and by extension to CSR, one that acknowledges the asymmetrical relations of power that always help determine and constrain communicative possibilities. This has particular implications for the reporting of CSR activity, which ideally would present an attempt to 'establish and extend ethical and mutually beneficial relationships' with stakeholders through exchange, negotiation and dialogue, rather than through the 'monotonous and monologic retelling' in glossy reports of an organisation's good deeds (Surma 2006a:58).

The problem, as Demetrious and Hughes identify, is that CSR 'can easily evolve into "spin with ethics"', which results in an understandable cynicism on the part of the public of the real motivation for CSR activity:

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[1] Milton Friedman, 1970, 'The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits', *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 September.

Consequently, any organization's espousal of CSR may well combine (in various proportions) a genuine commitment to ethical practice, a pragmatic recognition that 'doing the right thing' will leave its operations unhindered by critics and protesters, and a cynical calculation of the economic benefits of such unhindered operations (2004:5).

We suggest that, in the context of public relations practice in Malaysia and Singapore, there are a number of competing discourses which flavour any discussion of CSR; these range from a philanthropic orientation, to the need to claim some kind of legitimacy to operations (perhaps by gaining a 'licence to operate' through public relations or CSR activity) and a 'business case' based on increasing profits (and thereby benefiting society). Each of these discourses appears to influence or frame the understanding and practice of CSR.

3. The role of context

The impact of social, political, cultural and environmental factors on public relations practice is well established, as is the dominant use of normative theories from the US and Western Europe (Sriramesh 2004; Fitch & Surma, 2006). Similarly, writers on CSR express concerns with regards to the dominance of Western theorising and models and the need to consider carefully CSR practice and the specific business and cultural contexts in non-Western contexts (Birch & Moon 2004; Godfrey & Hatch 2007). Globalisation appears to increase CSR activity, and Chapple and Moon hypothesise that crossing borders multiplies the number of stakeholder groups (2005: 434-5, 438). Significantly, this increase appears to apply regardless of whether the company is 'Western' or Asian' in ownership or origin (Chapple & Moon 2005: 438). An additional challenge for non-Asian multinational corporations is the potential to be seen as either an imperialising force imposing Western – rather than Asian – values, or as an unethical corporation keen to exploit the fewer regulations and lower wages of developing nations (Zinken 2004).

According to Kolk and van Tulder, managing across borders thrusts multinational corporations into 'a moral free space…in which context matters, and where managers have to deal with conflicts of relative development and cultural traditions' (2004:50). If we accept our earlier definition of CSR as, ideally, a negotiated and dialogic communicative activity with stakeholders, then it is crucial to examine also the specific context in which this activity takes place. Only then, can we begin to understand CSR as an ethical commitment between the organisation and its publics, one built precisely on the contextually embedded interaction between the two. It is difficult, for example, for a multinational corporation to implement a global CSR strategy without being able to first negotiate with local stakeholders, and in turn taking into consideration the appropriateness of imposing such a strategy without considering local social, cultural, environmental and political factors.

4. The role of discourse

Our research is concerned with how public relations professionals in Singapore and Malaysia perceive corporate social responsibility and define ethical business practices. In order to better understand the practice and function of CSR in specific contexts, we draw on the public relations-oriented focus of Motion and Weaver (2005), and Motion and Leitch (1996) to argue the appropriateness of considering the role of discourses and critical analysis in such a project. We believe this allows us to better understand the CSR discourses in relation to their political, economic and social contexts (Motion & Weaver 2005:50)

The notion of discourse is a complex one, variously understood by the diverse disciplines that have harnessed it for their specific purposes. Broadly speaking, discourse can be thought of as the language practices, the knowledges, ideologies, beliefs and values and the institutions and structures that produce, sustain and contest particular orientations to and understandings of society, human subjects and their personal, social and commercial (and so on) relationships with one another. Discourses may also be seen as constituting and articulating particular kinds of knowledge (Fairclough 2001). In the case of CSR Godfrey and Hatch (2007) have identified that CSR comes to be known or defined by two broad disciplines: moral philosophy and economics. It is this tension between discourses of CSR as a moral or ethical force, and CSR with a business or economic imperative which interests us. Implicit in this account is the role of power in organising, hierarchising, privileging or muting particular discourses in given situations or contexts, as well as the role of discourses in mediating, maintaining or modifying asymmetrical relations of power between subjects.

We are interested in and persuaded by Motion and Leitch's contention that PR practitioners are 'discourse technologists who play a central role in the maintenance and transformation of discourse' (1996:298). Therefore, offering a critical analysis of the CSR discourses deployed by interview participants in Malaysia and Singapore in discussion of their views on CSR will, we hope, begin to offer an insight into the complex influences on meanings of and approaches to CSR in those two countries, and how CSR is rhetorically constituted and contested.

5. Methodology

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews in June 2006, with five public relations practitioners in Singapore and five in Malaysia. Interviewees were selected though existing industry contacts in both countries. They work for diverse organisations (including government, multinational corporations, and an

activist group), and as consultants with clients in diverse sectors (including finance, tourism, retail and property development). The respondents were asked to validate the transcriptions of these interviews, and the two researchers analysed the transcripts separately, and discussed/reviewed their findings to ensure the validity and reliability of their interpretations (Daymon & Holloway 2002:240). This research method was chosen as the most appropriate to discover the perceptions and attitudes of the practitioners, and through the critical analysis to identify local, contextualised responses to the concept of corporate social responsibility.

We value the role of qualitative research for this kind of study as we are keen to understand the 'intentions, motivations and subjective experiences' from 'the point of view of those in it' (Daymon & Holloway 2002:4), that is, those professionals responsible for implementing CSR programs and activities in Singapore and Malaysia. There has been a dearth of qualitative research which focuses on the 'multifaceted meaning systems' and cultural implications of Western theories of public relations in non-Western settings, theories which are mostly based on quantitative research (Sriramesh, Takasaki & Kim 1999:6). Similarly, Jahansoozi (2006:90) calls for more qualitative research in exploring both the relationship and the construction of meaning between organisations and their publics, a relationship which embraces, amongst other things, CSR.

6. Discussion of interviews: the discourses of CSR

In the view of three interview participants, the rhetoric of CSR articulated through commercially oriented discourse appears to pose a particular problem, as it involves disarticulating notions of obligation/responsibility (doing what is right, what you 'need' to do') from their philosophical/religious orientations, and rearticulating them in marketing/economics discourse. For example, Agnes, a public relations consultant, who works with both Malaysian and international clients in Kuala Lumpur, remarked, in response to the question of what she sees as the link between public relations and CSR: 'I don't want to use the word social responsibility; [the practice] is natural in [Malaysia].' Nonetheless, she also discusses the mixing of Western and Malaysian values that has complicated understanding of and approaches to CSR. She makes the link between CSR and what she argues is the Western emphasis on reporting to comment that for her this 'natural' practice is part of the cultural value system, and one which she links directly to her Buddhist faith:

It is part of my Buddhist culture done right, it just says you do it. If you have a little bit more money, you give [it] away, you have a little bit more brains, use your brains [on] something better'. We don't say [as the West does]: 'I want to do it. I must have recognition for it. I must document it.'

This understanding of a Western-inspired CSR as first and foremost a question of reporting – as a rhetorical demonstration of responsible practice – is clearly significant in both the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts. However, according to Agnes, such requirements appear to transform what should be a moral, albeit non-verbalised, deontological motivation to 'do good' into a self-oriented and self-promotional one (see L'Etang 2006).

Although Ramasamy and Ting argue that employees in Malaysia and Singapore indicate 'low levels of CSR awareness' (2004:114), we suggest in light of Agnes' comments above, it may more properly be unfamiliarity or even discomfort with articulation of CSR as commercial or marketing discourse, one related specifically to reporting practices itself that explains the perceived lack. Indeed, as Chapple and Moon point out, 'CSR may be under-reported in companies that have long regarded their social responsibility as part and parcel of business or that describe certain components of CSR in other ways' (2005: 424).

To extend this idea, we can turn to another interviewee, Chandran a senior communications professional with a Singaporean multinational property company, who had this to say about CSR:

It is important and yet sometimes it is overplayed. And [some companies] make a big fuss about their CSR issues and all that, when actually you should just be correct in the first instance, you should not do things that are wrong.

His words suggest that he also prefers the discourse of morality, to talk about doing things properly, 'correct[ly]', to CSR as performative or self-promotional. CSR here is articulated as an activity, a doing, rather than as a self-serving display. He goes on:

Neither do we like to shout whenever we do something, we don't want to make a [fuss]. It doesn't mean that we don't cover stories and all that, so if it has got a nice human touch to the whole thing we do that. But we will not go out of the way to try and say "we are socially responsible". I mean we don't need to shout that. We just do it.

Chandran discusses the various social housing initiatives funded by his company, and then remarks:

Now all these things are recorded in our annual report. We just put it down in our annual report. We just reflect this as a matter of fact. But to go around shouting CSR as that it [adds value] to the business I think it

is not necessary. That is the line that I take. It does not mean that we don't do it. It is just actually embedded. To me it is almost common sense.

Again we see, then, an apparent resistance to the rhetoric, a resistance to articulating CSR through a marketing or promotional discourse, and instead a preference for articulating (in his words, 'reflecting') CSR as 'a matter of fact', as 'almost common sense', normative social practice. Both Agnes and Chandran appear to prefer a moral discourse, not produced or negotiated through dialogue or between subjects in a given context, but accepted (through religious, philosophical or cultural justification) as the 'right' or 'good' or 'correct' thing to do.

It could be argued that these two interview participants *confuse* the practices of self-promotion and publicity with those reporting practices resulting from an important and increasing demand for corporate transparency and disclosure (that is, for demonstration of corporations' responsible processes and practices). As Chapple and Moon point out, 'one of the key themes in CSR is its 'conspicuous reporting' (2005: 424). Nonetheless, it seems that such CSR reporting practices are regularly treated by corporations (and by public relations) *not* as relational or dialogic modes of communicating with interested stakeholders but as the selective, one-way disclosure[2] of quasi-objective "information" (see Jahansoozi 2006; Surma 2006b). Such treatment can risk ignoring the role of stakeholders with the capacity to make meaning from and act on or respond to that "information". In other words, such treatment might diminish the role of responsibility as a dialogic practice, to responsibility as 'shout[ing]', to adapt Chandran's comment.

Like Agnes and Chandran, a third interview participant, James, a Singaporean reputation management consultant based in Singapore, picks up on this focus on transparency in one of his comments that 'this shift to the "show me" world has created, all of a sudden, a shock [to] corporates in Singapore'. He also links the 'show me' world to demands for and growing expectations of transparency on the part of Singaporeans from Singaporean business. He highlights what he sees as the Singaporean business tradition of not publicising, not disclosing, not being 'transparent'. This understanding of a Western-inspired CSR with an emphasis on reporting – as a rhetorical demonstration of responsible practice – is clearly significant in both the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts. Both countries have strict legal requirements designed to foster greater transparency and accountability, through the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange and the Singapore Stock Exchange, as well as through a variety of corporate regulatory and government bodies (Rodan, 2002;

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[2] Such practices suggest a favouring of the transmission model of communication; see Jahansoozi 2006: 82.

Ramasamy & Ting, 2004). Rodan suggests these reporting requirements are in part a response to a general lack of confidence in the Asian financial markets following the Asian economic crisis of 1997-8 (2002:23).

James goes on to describe the relationship between CSR and public relations as a 'disingenuous' one, and claims that the general public 'distrust' of CSR is justified. He claims that the publics' view of the corporation is: 'it must be [that you're doing CSR] because it is tied to your guilt, or your marketing effort, or something like that. You can't be doing it purely because you feel that you need to.' He feels that public relations has an important role to play here in rearticulating the discourse of CSR:

And so [PR practitioners] need to articulate that … Now we haven't done enough to convince the man [sic] in the street that you are doing this because you think it is right and it is not some financial regulatory requirement, not because of some guilt, not because of some market[ing] gimmick. And that is a challenge.

For now, more typically, and perhaps particularly given the influence of Western liberal values and capitalist markets, the influx of multinational corporations, and the increased movement of people across national and continental boundaries, we see CSR in Malaysia and Singapore, according to some interview participants, as properly motivated by 'enlightened self-interest' (see Curtin and Boynton 2001, p.416)[3]
So, for example, Mei, a public relations consultant who runs her own agency in Kuala Lumpur, had this to say in answer to a question about what she sees as the relationship between public relations and CSR: 'If the client has a budget we try and put in some CSR component, and even if they want to do a campaign … I try and put in a CSR component. It makes it so much nicer.' CSR is construed here as an 'add on' element, a specific public relations tactic, and a separable 'component' of an organisation's activities, rather than as embedded practice. As well, its inclusion (or exclusion) is dependent on first and foremost economic considerations.

This is in contrast to Matthew's approach to CSR. Matthew is a Malaysian in-house public relations professional working for a US multinational corporation who sees the role of CSR as vital. It is for him also explicitly strategic and disciplined (as community relations) by the demands and the discourses of marketing and commerce:

My thinking is that community relations is the part of …public relations, where you are dealing with a wider community and building a relationship with them. And public relations has a role to play in a sense of, it is by interacting with the community it benefits the community definitely as well as the company because it allows

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[3] See also Martinson (1994) who argues that, given public relations' responsibility to forge social connections, enlightened self-interest inevitably compromises the needs of significant others in favour of the self.

the company to find out what is going on within the community, say in terms of market research, you know. You don't need to pay a company to come up and tell you what is happening in the community, but by mixing and interacting with the people you understand what they think of your product, of your brand, what are the issues that they are having with it. And I feel it plays a big role because community relations is one thing where we can talk about or shout about without selling a product.

The focus on 'interacting' with communities and forging 'relationships' with them might suggests the potential for an ethics discourse to emerge, although the interspersed marketing discourse and logic (of branding, of the product) as well as the larger (if latent) motive of promoting the product threatens to compromise that exchange. As well, Mathew apparently does not feel the unease about CSR reporting apparent in some of the other interviews, as he comments favourably on the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and its promotion of CSR reporting in Malaysia: 'people can start knowing what the company is doing and they recognise companies for doing good or giving back to the community so in a way it is learning from each other'.

Like Matthew, Charlotte links her company's extensive CSR activity to product promotion, marketing and commercial discourses. Charlotte is a British senior executive responsible for external relations in the Asian region for a large US multinational company. She stresses the importance of linking CSR to 'products, because at the end of the day we are not a charity so there needs to be some kind of link and relevance back to the company'. At the same time, Charlotte is clear that there is an ethical obligation for her multinational company to be involved in supporting local communities:

There is also an obligation for companies to be socially responsible and to be able to give back in a very direct way to the communities in which we live and work, and I think particularly companies that are international companies, and maybe have the capability and the resources to be able to help some of our less fortunate counterparts then I think that, as a company that is something that we take very seriously.

This sense of corporate obligation to the community in which the company works is interesting when compared with the earlier assertion about the need to justify such an approach commercially (where the community serves as a potential market), and perhaps is not untypical of the mixing of discourses in CSR discussions generally. At the same time, Charlotte recognises the unequal relations of power between foreign multinationals (with 'the capability and the resources') and the local communities ('our less fortunate counterparts') in which they operate, and over which they have significant influence. All the same, the philanthropic motive is explicitly qualified, or discursively marshalled by an implied commercial rationale, as

Charlotte talks about the principles identified for 'cause work' – the community initiatives and programs with which the corporation involves itself.

7. Conclusion

This paper examines the social and political implications of CSR by considering how CSR is articulated through particular moral/ethical and economic/political discourses. The use of interviews with public relations professionals is an attempt to relate these discourses to CSR practice and to discover the perceptions of those practitioners who are responsible for developing CSR activity in the particular contexts of Singapore and Malaysia.

We did not expect there to be a single cohesive interpretation of CSR, as we have established the very term suggests a struggle between moral and economic discourses. Diverse understandings of CSR are articulated by communications and public relations professionals in Singapore and Malaysia, working in-house for large multinational corporations, or as independent consultants for local and international clients. These different understandings represent the discursive confluence (and conflict) of values, attitudes and practices inherent in globalising cultures such as Malaysia and Singapore. As well, what those understandings particularly draw attention to is the way CSR is produced by certain discourses to mute or elide what we perceive as the primacy of ethical or moral relationships in CSR, and the responsibility it entails as necessarily dialogic and communicative.

Several interviewees appeared uncomfortable with the term CSR, and indeed with accompanying questions around ethics, and preferred not to use the term at all. This discomfort should not be interpreted as an opposition to social responsibility, or to philanthropic gestures or to ethical practices in the way public relations or businesses are managed. Quite clearly, some of these same interviewees are clearly committed to a moral code of behaviour, a morality which may stem from religious or cultural beliefs such as Islamic ideas around benevolence (see for example, Beekun and Badawi 2005) or Confucian commitments to society (see Chow 2005). At least two interviewees, Agnes and James, (and possibly Chandran) expressed an opposition to what was seen as the 'Western' need to self-promote and report on CSR activity.

Others, such as Charlotte and Mei, linked CSR activity specifically back to business goals, such as profits and the promotion of products. This suggests that, at least in these examples, the articulation of CSR through economic and/or promotional/marketing discourses can be more clearly understood by revisiting the notion of CSR as motivated by 'enlightened self-interest' (see Curtin and Boynton 2001:416) and the legitimate

pursuance of profits (Wettstein 2005).

However, we concur with Palazzo and Scherer, who argue persuasively that corporations (2006:77) must earn *moral legitimacy* through *interaction* and *deliberation* with stakeholders. 'A turn towards moral legitimacy … implicates a turn from the economic, utility-driven and *output-oriented* view on CSR to a political, communication-driven and *input-oriented* concept of organizational responsibility' (Palazzo & Scherer 2006:79). This suggests a deliberately ethical orientation to and dialogic account of CSR, which is in sharp contrast to the pragmatic, economic focus of some of the practitioners we interviewed.

In conclusion, the discursive examination of the different interviews is revealing. They – not surprisingly – demonstrate mixed understandings of CSR. Some present CSR either unreflectingly as 'natural' or 'common sense' and reveal a commitment to doing what is 'right', and at the same time resist rearticulating CSR activity through economic discourses and self-promotion. If we reconsider CSR as a communicative activity which involves interacting and negotiating an ethical relationship with stakeholders at the heart of CSR, then this very process may be able to negotiate the 'right' activity, the parameters of Kolk and van Tulder's 'moral free space' and view such activity as primarily ethical and concerned with an organisation's social obligations, and accountability to others rather than about the promotion of itself and its products. The disparity in power between some of the corporations and the beneficiaries of their CSR activity – as identified by Charlotte in her articulation of 'our less fortunate counterparts' – may suggest one difficulty in a concept of CSR as communicative (asymmetrical) reciprocity. However, it also suggests the potential of CSR to modify power relations between big business and traditionally less powerful stakeholders, precisely through the negotiation of ethical concerns. It also suggests a new challenge for CSR researchers: to reconsider CSR in terms of power relationships and social obligation and to find ways to articulate CSR not through economic discourses of self-interest and promotion, but as an ethical activity which seeks moral legitimacy of a communicative kind. In a globalised world where business assumes an ever-increasing influence over society, the challenge is to identify the political implications of CSR activity and to find new, ethical ways of interacting with stakeholders.

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