ABSTRACT

Many Internet-based businesses have emerged and gained prominence in past decades; growing numbers of them have developed moral declarations in the form of mottos or ethical statements. For example, the corporate motto “don’t be evil” (linked with Google) has generated considerable controversy, and Twitter and Facebook have comparable ethical pronouncements. The article analyzes how these ethical expressions have played roles in discourse on organizational activities, exploring their use in discussions of particular research, marketing, and operations situations. After addressing the origins of these mottos and statements, this article positions them in contrast with the more finely-detailed ethical codes and related initiatives that have been associated with some high-tech organizations over past decades. The article analyzes the potential influences of ethical expressions generated by organizations on corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. It projects the future of such ethical manifestations in light of critically-important privacy, security, and economic concerns faced in high-tech arenas.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Ethical Codes, Moral Discourse, Privacy, Search Engines, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

How do organizations make sense of the panoply of ethical concerns they face, especially in rapidly-changing technological and social environments?

Some organizations produce, refine, and disseminate detailed ethical codes or credos that encapsulate their positions and possibly focus the attentions of their stakeholders on critical matters (Hester & Young, 2013; Lere & Gaumnitz, 2007);
others produce more succinct ethical mottos or statements (Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Martin, 2011). This article presents a critical analysis of the origins and societal influence of Google’s “don’t be evil” ethical motto and related ethical pronouncements, along with comparable expressions by Twitter, Facebook, and other Internet-based organizations. It applies the insights generated to the emerging corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts in high-tech fields. The article addresses the question of whether the development of a “large-grained” corporate motto as a cultural and ethical object can indeed serve to supply comprehensive social and ethical guidance for organizations, as opposed to the iterative development of a more complex, detailed code of ethics or comparable attempt at moral clarification.

Google’s “don’t be evil” motto presents an assortment of illuminating issues: what role could the notion of “evil” (associated with powerful and evocative theological and spiritual values) play in considering the actions of an Internet company? Why did “don’t be evil” as a motto have such a powerful and lasting influence on the cultures of Internet business, reaching well beyond Google itself and into other information technology companies? An assortment of ethical dimensions has been explored in the light of the “don’t be evil” motto, including the fairness and legitimacy of information-related practices (Hoornagle, 2009; Fuller & Goffey, 2014). Comparably, in a 2010 BBC interview, Evan Williams (co-founder of Twitter) stated that his organization’s goal is “to be a force for good”; Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook produced an analogous ethical statement in 2012. The US online gaming corporation Zynga developed the motto “Connecting the world through games” to emphasize its social and ethical perspective (Hartman, Mead, Werhane, & Christmas, 2011; Machajewski, 2013). The motto is often used in Zynga communications, for example in founder Marcus Pincus’ statement to the press about some Zynga layoffs and design changes (Mlot, 2013). Internet-based organizations often have only a short timeframe for establishing reputations and setting ethical tones, and clues to their corporate culture can be vital to observers and stakeholders. Thus the genres that these organizations choose for developing and disseminating their ethical stances are of special importance.

The analyses produced in this paper have specific implications for CSR initiatives. Insights about how mottos and related statements are utilized in the social construction of corporate activity can be useful for organizations that wish to frame more precisely their own ethical perspectives and communicate them more clearly to stakeholders. Answers to these questions may also be of assistance to organizational participants who are endeavoring to engage more fully in CSR efforts. Besio and Pronzini (2014) write that “morality becomes available to organizations as a medium that can be re-specified according to their
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