Standards of corporate moral responsibility: The role of opinion leaders

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Abstract

This research is focused on the role that opinion leaders play in changing moral standards and in setting the agenda for corporate moral responsibility, as well as on highlighting those organizations that fail to conform to moral standards. There is a demand for independent moral validation of corporate decisions, actions and initiatives. In response to this demand opinion leaders try to provide credible and objective information that appears to be more trustworthy since opinions leaders are assumed to be beyond corporate control. Independence and regular public exposure make opinion leaders influential enough to set the benchmarks and basic requirements for corporate moral standards.

Keywords: opinion leaders; corporate moral responsibility; moral standards; agenda setting; online influencers

Estándares de la moral en responsabilidad corporativa: El rol de los líderes de opinión

Resumen

Esta investigación se centra en el papel que juegan los líderes de opinión en el cambio de los estándares morales y en el establecimiento de la agenda para la responsabilidad moral corporativa, así como en destacar aquellas organizaciones que no se ajustan a los estándares morales. Existe una demanda de validación moral independiente de las decisiones, acciones e iniciativas empresariales. En respuesta a esta demanda los líderes de opinión tratan de proporcionar información creíble y objetiva que parece ser más confiable ya que se supone que los líderes de las opiniones están más allá del control corporativo. La independencia y la exposición pública regular hacen que los líderes de opinión sean lo suficientemente influyentes como para establecer los puntos de referencia y los requisitos básicos para los estándares morales corporativos.

Palabras clave: líderes de opinión; Responsabilidad moral corporativa; estándares morales; configuración de la agenda; Influenciadores en línea.

INTRODUCTION

Independence and regular public exposure make opinion leaders influential enough to set the benchmarks and basic requirements for corporate moral standards. Often such opinion leaders are also the primary source of information on moral validation of corporate initiatives for many stakeholders. Because opinion leaders can substantially influence public expectations on corporate moral responsibility, monitoring emerging concerns that they raise becomes an essential part of corporate communications.

The primary objective of this article is to analyze how moral theories of corporate actions acquire normative status. Secondary objectives are a) to explore the roles that opinion leaders play in

changing moral standards and in setting the agenda for corporate moral responsibility; b) to highlight characteristics of the organizations that fail to conform to moral standards; c) to conceptualize the key factors that determine independent moral validation of corporate decisions, actions and initiatives; and d) to describe the process of legitimization of corporations via opinion leaders who provide credible and objective information that appears to be more trustworthy. In the end, this article endeavors to answer two questions: first, why do moral theories of corporate actions exist and how do they acquire normative status; and second, how do these theories become a standard of behavior and what role do opinion leaders and influencers play in the dissemination and adaptation of corporate moral theories.

1. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The notion of corporate moral responsibility has expanded significantly in the past few decades. It is widely accepted that nowadays companies have also moral, and not just legal and commercial dimensions of corporate actions. Decisions can be examined from an ethical point of view, choices and actions can be evaluated and justified from a different sets of principles - moral principles, that by some people may be considered higher than law in standards. Researchers (French, 1975, 1984; Goodpaster, 1983, 2006; Tuomela, 1984, 1988; Werhane, 1985; Gilbert, 1992, 2000; Miller, 2001, 2011; List&Pettit, 2011) recognise to a certain extent the importance of both legal and moral obligations. A company's commitment is linked to its level of responsibility.

Despite the fact that this point of view can be considered prevalent in academic circles, there still exists a contradictory view, that companies have legal but not moral obligations. This view expresses the general premise, first formulated by Milton Friedman (Friedman, 1970) that businesses do not exist because of altruistic motives. Businesses' function is to make profit by satisfying people's needs in goods and services. Artificially imposed moral obligations and policies that contradict companies' business goals, along with poorly coordinated efforts of incompetent employees

who are responsible for fulfilling moral obligations in form of some special policies, often lead to misallocation of funds, time and other resources. As a result companies get involved in activities that are not beneficial for their commercial performance. Those who reject the idea of positive moral obligations that corporations may have also point out that by allocating corporate funds to the support of various efforts in the interest of the general public, companies act unethically towards their shareholders: in essence spending other people's money. Ethical value of actions as far as the general public is concerned is also questionable - unless a company is completely selfless in its ethical efforts it creates a false impression. But such complete selflessness is rare and unnecessary.

For example, in speaking about the challenge of international tax treatment Jan du Plessis, the Chairman of Rio Tinto, said "it is up to governments to put in place legal structures and tax regimes which have the desired outcome. … Companies cannot be moralist, they can only follow the law." (Boyd, 2014). He believes tax minimization is not an ethical or a moral issue.

From the corporate point of view, a voluntarily accepted moral obligation can be a means utilised for attaining specific business ends. And unless these ends are specified and properly described as measurable and attainable, any policies are at risk of being targeted at society in general and at no one in particular, and the efficiency of the efforts becomes questionable. In this worldview, the notion is that morality is not in the domain of business nor part of its agenda. It is a popular belief that the questions of moral responsibility are outside the domain of business.

Despite the existence of this approach, it is impossible to deny or defy the fact that business activities do have both a financial and a moral dimension. It has a moral dimension because any business activity is primarily about relationships with and between people, whether colleagues, customers or communities. It is a social interaction; it is something done unto other people. Business is one of the areas where morality can be applied specifically to the realm of relationships among people to examine actions with regard to their justness or goodness or morality.

Business has a moral dimension because good decision-making involves making good and wise choices. It has a moral dimension because ethics deals with the means chosen for interacting with one's fellows, it is about "what you do unto others". And businesses constantly "do unto others", their actions necessarily presupposing some interpersonal conduct.

Corporations are moral agents, and have moral obligations, and moral responsibility. This is different from a narrower concept of corporate social responsibility, which is understood as "the obligation of decision makers to take actions which protect and improve the welfare of society as a whole along with their own interests" (Davis & Blomstrom, 1975) or the responsibility of a company for the totality of its impact (Werther & Chandler, 2006). Expressed in James Grunig's (2000) point of view, public (moral) responsibility is understood to be the commitment that derives from the basic management of the organisation; social responsibility, on the other hand, comprises that which derives from the ability of the organization to develop roles and therefore influence the society around it.

On a basic level the organization has to follow established norms and comply with the labor and economic commitments which derive from its own management. On a second level, responsibility is developed by influencing a broader social environment and becoming involved in areas of general interest which transcend the organization's reason for being. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) imposes a potentially vaster obligation on corporate actors as corporate citizens, which seems to go beyond moral obligation, thus becoming political, attending to broader social conditions and possibilities. Because the political realm is governed by concerns other than the moral - in particular, concerns about authority and the use of coercive force, - we will focus mostly on the issues of moral responsibilities rather than CSR.

At the same time expectations of corporate morality also have a normative dimension, since they refer to the questions of what actions can qualify and be labeled as moral. The questions of corporate morality belong to the domain of normative ethics:

attempting to answer the set of questions that arise when considering how corporations ought to act, morally speaking. Normative ethics is concerned with moral norms. A moral norm is a norm in the sense of being a standard with which moral agents ought to comply. It is meant to guide our actions, and to the extent that people or organizations do not comply, we may be judged morally—that is, morally blamed. This is then the meaning of a moral norm.

These are the reasons why moral questions also occupy the mind of a contemporary executive - they are concerned not only with what their legal obligations are, but also what moral obligations could be, and what the consequences would be of failing to fulfil these obligations. In other words, executives are concerned with how they ought to act from a moral point of view. As Christine Korsgaard puts it, "Why should I be moral?" (1996:9).

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. Social purpose of corporate morality

Moral norms are **devices** that are used for creating a society in which wrong actions will be considered unacceptable; it's a means for creating certain social circumstances where companies will be morally blamed for performing (or failing to perform) certain actions. In this sense normative moral concepts are a means for attaining particular goal, or a human device for the realization of some definite ends - creating particular social circumstances.

The question most people interested in moral theory applicable to corporate actions want answered is what shape "society" should take and how companies should be expected to act. They want to know what institutions should be established and which norms enacted as consistent with the ideals of justice, virtue and moral values. So the relevant question to ask in relation to any proposed moral norm is not why companies or organizations should be interested in acting in accordance to this norm, but why the general public should be interested in developing a society that adopts this norm as a general standard of telling right from wrong. Those

norms aid the development of particular standards of social interactions, creating certain social circumstances, as was suggested in the concept of society-based constructivism by David Copp (1995, 2007).

This is why we are currently concerned with the question of why the public or various groups of stakeholders should prefer to create social circumstances that will be based on a certain moral norm, or why they should agree to consider a particular norm as a moral standard for society in some ways imposed on corporate actors. It is obvious that we are not talking about individual moral preferences, but rather about a particular social device that functions in a particular way. Therefore the relevant question that we should ask is why should anyone be interested in having a society in which corporations are required to hold moral responsibility for their actions? Or, to put it in more conventional terms, why would anyone want to have a society where, for example, companies are held responsible also for injuries users inflicted on themselves, even when the company could not have prevented it?

The question is not what corporate executives' subjective moral preferences could be. Moral standards cannot stem from selfishness, since selfishness and the lack of concern for others as a principle is incapable of the relevant understanding necessary to sustain it. This principle would not become a shared value; there is a logically unavoidable conflict of interest as applied to a society, so this idea is self-refuting. If a moral norm that is proposed can not be aligned with subjective preferences of individuals that form a society, then this norm will be considered useless and will not be accepted.

In fact, if we take a step back and think about reasons why we are interested with the questions of corporate morality, it is precisely because we want all the different decisions made by corporate executives to be moral. Most people are concerned with the question of morality because they have a strong subjective preference not to be treated badly; the idea of being treated immorally is something for which each of us has a very strong sense of resentment.

Some people argue that we also have a feeling of resentment to the idea of others being treated unjustly (Mises, 1988). However, as human history seems to demonstrate, the amount of empathy that a given human has for another human may vary both among individual humans and with respect to particular situations. Empathy is a highly subjective emotion. An individual preference to be treated fairly seems to be a much stronger driving force for our pursuit of the foundation of justice and fairness. Most corporate executives would feel more comfortable when they use unethical means to achieve their goals as compared to situations when an unethical means is used against themselves. It's less stressful to be a wrongdoer than a victim of wrongdoing.

Our general suggestion is that the reason why someone might want to have such a society lies in a very subjective preference to be protected from unethical or immoral actions of corporations. The vast majority of people prefer not to be victimized by corporations or exploited in terms of labor practices, the environment, etc. We would even suggest that the "groundnorms" of corporate morality originate from our desire not to become the victims of misconduct. So, adopting and promoting the moral standards of corporate actions means developing a society that satisfies the general human preferences not to be mistreated.

Where we can develop effective moral norms that reflect subjective preferences of the people, those laws would promulgate in the key opinion leaders, and would have an effect on widely accepted norms. Then approbation and goodwill for following the norm, and reprobation and ill will for violating it, become common. This approbation and reprobation also generally become internalized, forming the consciences of individuals. As a result a particular action becomes frowned upon or even punishable (Sanchez, 2011). As a means, moral norms and requirements are not evaluated on the grounds of their goodness or badness, but rather on the grounds of their effectiveness or usefulness for the attainment of the ends chosen and aimed at. It is important to stress that we are not trying to establish why a particular company or a particular executive ought to adopt or follow a particular moral

norm; we are merely trying to understand how the norms, once established, affect corporate decision making.

Corporate moral norms are **not** a part of objective moral theory (if anything of this sort can exist); neither are moral norms instruments or devices for corporate decision making. It is true that there is no reason besides arbitrary preference for a company or board or a particular executive to change his conduct and conform to a particular norm of ethics if not doing so will cause him no harm. And therefore if a corporate actor or body of actors can act contrary to the norms of a given moral norm and yet avoid the negative consequences described by that norm, to this extent she or he may continue to act in the manner to which she or he is accustomed, safe in the knowledge that the specified negative consequences will not befall him or her. (Conill, Schönwälder-Kuntze, & Luetge 2013).

Of course, there always will be a number of stereotypical business executives for whom revenue and short-term profits are all that matter, regardless of how many people may be mistreated along the way. Some executives are proud of being ruthless and scornful of factoring any morality into their deals, taking maximum advantage of any weakness in their opposition wherever they can.

But this should not necessarily mean that in studying corporate morality we should conform to selfish ethical egoism. Doubts could lead to agnosticism or nihilism or even to suggest that since there are no correct answers corporate morality just doesn't exist at all. Yet there is no reason to succumb to moral relativism. We think there is a way to overcome this seemingly unsolvable problem by clearly identifying the roles of moral norms.

Moral norms are not tools for personal decision making. They are devices for creating particular kinds of social circumstances, conditions. The confusion arises from imprecision in terms. Moral norms are not there to conform to or not to conform to. The question of how to make sure that people decide to conform to a particular norm is the question of the norm «enforcement», which is a totally different issue - how to make sure that once the norm is adopted people actually prefer to follow it.

Moral norms can take on a life of their own, and become ends in themselves. When making decisions that are covered by a moral norm, individuals do not deliberate over the ultimate utilitarian considerations on which the norm is based. Instead their decision is immediately determined by social pressure and conscience. And the nature of social pressure as well as the processes of its application is a key element of our understanding of the issues in question.

2.2. The role of opinion leaders

Opinion leaders can be defined as influential members of a community, group, or society to whom others turn for advice, opinions, and views. Opinion leaders are the filters of ideas and information. Opinion leaders engage with the media where their ideas are spread to the wider world of those who care about the industry, issue, interest or ideology (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1957; Merton, 1957; Weimann, 1991).

The role of the opinion leaders does not boil down to jumping into decision-making processes and advising executives on what they ought to do. Instead they influence the creation of social expectations and concrete circumstances that are reflected in intersubjectively understood general rules that executives can refer to in their general strategic thinking (rather than in a moment of crisis-solving). If a particular opinion leader is in promoting some norms generally successful, those general rules will become integrated into the intersubjectively accepted and widely recognized moral norm that corporations will be expected to follow; otherwise their actions will be blamed, and public acceptance will vanish.

If opinion leaders realize that, for example, it is not morally acceptable to maximize profit at the expense of people and the environment, and they convince the general populace of that fact, this revolution in public opinion would engender a revolution in the prevailing morality that will influence behavior of decision makers, making companies come under even greater public pressure to deliver on their broader moral responsibilities.

The role that opinion leaders play in changing moral standards is in setting the agenda for good corporate behavior and for highlighting those organizations that meet or fail to meet these standards. They have the authority and status in society as they interpret, endorse and reinforce corporate messages to internal as well as external stakeholders.

Because the public want an independent view on how moral a particular company is, there is a demand for independent moral validation of corporate decisions, actions and initiatives. In response to this demand opinion leaders try to provide credible and objective information, that appears to be more trustworthy because opinion leaders are assumed to be beyond corporate control.

Independence and regular public exposure makes them influential enough to set the benchmarks and basic requirements for corporate moral standards. Often such opinion leaders are also the primary – and sometimes only – source of information on moral validation of corporate initiatives for many stakeholders (Morsing, 2005).

2.3. Public agenda and public diplomacy

Public agenda has always been based on social engagement and moral responsibility. Public expectations of corporate morality are linked to the construction of the public agenda, which means a symbiosis of the media and the political agenda. Ordeix and Duarte (2009) mention that when speaking about corporate morality (as well public diplomacy) we are also speaking about an agenda-setting process; corporations practicing corporate diplomacy generally have the ability to perform because they mobilize "third-party endorsements" with foundations or think-tanks. The latter are expressing the intention to become opinion leaders in a specific subject: in this way, the "soul" and essence of the organization and company's personality are better defined through the endorsed moral norms.

Corporate diplomacy and engaging with opinion leaders goes beyond "public support," which means that it is not compatible with

a simple agenda-setting process (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In other words, corporations no longer need to rely on influencing the public agenda by influencing the media agenda (and thus the published opinion) through formally organized opinion groups. More likely, corporations will operate under the premises of "agenda building" (Cobb & Elder, 1971), meaning that they will be able to mobilize the formal agenda (the set of issues that decision makers have accepted for formal appreciation) and place public policy issues directly in the decisional agenda even without needing to go through the media agenda.

In this sense, either corporations or other kinds of organizations behave more and more as opinion leaders themselves at an upper level conditioning the agenda. According to this, perhaps we should not find it so strange when we see an increasing (however suspicious) harmony between public and companies' opinions.

If we understand corporate moral values to be the attitude preached by the company and upon which its principles of coexistence are based, companies that seek to generate a strong social activity and establish significant internal cohesion tend to have their moral values and complicities very well defined. In fact, a company is no longer understood to be morally committed if it has not adequately developed its reference values. Therefore, a company generates an identity to differentiate it from the competition when it demonstrates coherence with the attitudes it expresses.

But of course it also works the other way around. Individual and institutionalized opinion leaders can build their authority as influencers and set the agenda by themselves, for a wider variety of issues, including the issues of corporate morality. And then the executives have to respond to the changes in the requirements and adjust their policies.

As it got more difficult for a company to find everyone who is relevant to their causes, working with opinion leaders has evolved over the last few years from using them as a medium for disseminating messages and setting the agenda, to monitoring their opinion in order to identify emerging issues. Opinion leaders have a

public that trusts them and whose "followings" agenda is influenced by their opinion. By focusing on what opinion leaders are saying, companies can have better understanding of the changes in public expectations about morality.

2.4. Moral norms and corporate reputation at the age of the Internet

Opinion leaders' ability to reach a larger number of people and make a memorable impression became enhanced because of the social media that gave them a disproportionate impact on the publics. The main consequence in regards to moral issues is that the influencing potential has shifted. Prior to the social media revolution companies would work with opinion leaders to disseminate their vision and viewpoint, and a significant percentage of professional literature focuses on how opinion leaders can be used to influence public opinion in the interest of the company.

This becomes an increasingly important issue in the era of social and interactive media. Jordi Busquet (2006) states that interactive media allow new methods of private cultural consumption, new scenarios that produce a closer distance between the creations and usage of media. The net is full of so many virtual communities, millions of users who establish different type of relations with other users around the world, who have their same interests, opinions, values, etc. (Le Boterf, 1999). There are many companies which need to create virtual communities. Knowledge management in virtual communities is essential to achieve the engagement between the corporation and its public (Wasieleski, 2001). This is possible through the relations they establish with the opinion leaders, considering them as the ones who are able to transfer knowledge, opinions and corporate values to a large number of people.

In virtual communities, lots of companies count on opinion leaders to enlarge the awareness of the corporate values in the virtual space. Those opinion leaders that keep the corporate information updated on the net are the ones who lead cultural changes and adapt the company to the social claims. Grass-roots

communication processes enable social involvement, engagement and commitment. This only occurs when the organization is an opened system and has a horizontal communication structure (Mintzberg, 1992).

It is important to engage with opinion leaders not only because they can be instrumental in spreading a message, and garnering support, but because they are capable of influencing expectations, changing behaviors and creating whole new sets of circumstances for corporate actions. While every opinion leader is unique, their combined power and joined efforts (although not necessarily coordinated, but rather cumulative) can change the landscape significantly.

For instance, over the past few years, a company's scope of moral responsibility has extended to suppliers as well as to customers. Opinion leaders managed to draw attention to a number of companies whose suppliers have inflicted injuries on some third party. The fact that some of the unethical actions of particular manufacturers were disclosed bears nothing new in itself. What is new, however, is that the companies who have nothing to do with the issue apart from outsourcing some business from those who are responsible were morally blamed. And they now have to accept the consequences and take actions. For instance, Inditex (Spain) expelled one thousand suppliers for not following the basics of the human rights (Amado 2005).

Another example is Apple Inc. that faced a slew of bad press following deaths and reports of suicides at its China supply firms, when three workers at Foxconn Technology Co Ltd died in a blast from ignited dust from polishing iPads, and labor rights groups (for instance, Geoffrey Crothall from a Hong Kong labor rights organization) said 18 workers at Foxconn sites killed themselves, or tried to, in 2010. Apple CEO Tim Cook described the probe as an "unprecedented" audit to mitigate longstanding criticism of the maltreatment of workers at some suppliers (Malone & Jones, 2010; Moore, 2010). Apple Inc. has been perceived as accessory to the mistreatment of workers by their supplier (Foxconn), even if they have not been directly involved. This change in attitude brought

about by the change in public opinion resulted in emergence of new practices: companies are now regularly engaged in onsite inspections.

2.5. Public expectations and community pressure

Online opinion leaders can substantially influence public expectations, and therefore monitoring emerging concern about moral expectations from corporations that they raise is essential. Moral responsibility is an extremely human-focused topic, that deals with a subject of highly controversial nature on which different actors hold varied subjective views. Once these topics get into the orbit of opinion makers' interest, opinion leaders use them for further promotion of their status through communities. This way opinion leaders maintain their status and also affect the opinion of the wider public, which is their primary concern - opinion leaders seek to obtain more media coverage than others. They seek the acceptance of others and are especially motivated to enhance their social status (Rose & Kim, 2011). Online opinion leaders earn the support for their ideas, and effectively promote the concept of further moral responsibility for companies, thus engaging in a perpetual spiral.

Communities become more engaged in an issue and more passionate about it with more stakeholders supporting the issues. It became easier in the age of social media, since social media are by far the most effective channel for spreading emotionally-loaded topics. Those online opinion leaders not only engage in criticizing corporations, but they also demand that corporations fulfil their moral responsibilities, as duties they encounter in the practice of their business operations: treating employees fairly, protecting the environment, etc. Besides, they set new expectations for corporate socially minded leadership to improve conditions for everyone - reducing the gap between rich and poor, solve social problems, etc.

Sometimes the initiative and concepts that opinion leaders promote are intended to changing behavior patterns. Opinion leaders expect more from companies than the general public and

they are more engaged in issues related to corporate morality. They are more ethically demanding than the general public and more likely than the general public to morally blame irresponsible companies.

For companies, this can mean the necessity to conform and adapt under even greater public pressure to deliver on their broader understood responsibilities. Besides, ethical consumption and conscious consumer behavior (as well as investing) seem to grow as the general public follows the lead of opinion leaders, creating expanded market opportunities for morally responsible corporations.

Those opinion leaders that change expectations and really set the agenda for corporate ethics and morality are also often the ones that disagree with the already existing corporate practices. These are not the people that help companies to spread their views, but rather originators of insights and creators of new issues. This is why exploring their views, constantly monitoring their communication initiatives and engaging with them is so crucial. Expectations of corporate morality is not a static constant, but rather a constantly evolving set of beliefs and values, shared by the general public under the influence of multiple actors.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Following moral norms and legitimacy

Dealing with emotionally charged issues and expectations about morality of corporate actions requires handling criticism and speculations. This becomes increasingly important online, where opinion leaders are especially effective in influencing public opinion. When formulating and forming those moral principles and convictions these rational, even utilitarian arguments are increasingly important for shaping a healthy discussion about values. Analysing moral issues, problems and dilemmas that are a part of corporate decision making is an overheated topic that seems to attract constant attention in search for optimal solutions.

Most people agree that amoral and immoral corporations will have to behave better, and if they do not they will face consequences due to the transparency and immediacy of the social media reaction and the speed at which consequences can appear. In the age of instantaneous internet blaming, most corporations already understand that they must appear to be doing the right thing. Social networks and effective media are good at exposing bad practices and rewarding better ones, and as the networks continue to mature, transparency may improve further.

It is worth keeping in mind that two of the most important functions in public relations are to avoid incomprehension between the companies and the public, while making the information available to everybody. When a company tries to dialogue with public, it is in fact looking for internal and social support to legitimize and reinforce corporate principles and values. This can happen either way, internally or externally.

A basic definition of legitimation is an act of faith based on the sharing of the same values and objectives of both sides. Organizations are usually seeking for legitimacy to act and represent; this is part of their leadership principles, being the first stage for successfully shaping the effect of public diplomacy. In fact, we need to pursue a number of standards to engage citizens into building a society based on commitment and mutual understanding.

Legitimacy and power can exist independently or can be combined to create authority. Working for the general interest is normally recognized as a valid way to develop moral authority. And this is why some organizations decide to work under the claim that they are satisfying a general social demand, complementing public administration tasks. When doing this, it is fundamental that organizational values emerge as coherent with this social demand, and both should be aligned. The real symbiosis appears when society's values and organized groups'/organizations' values are successfully balanced between interest and expectations, a key element of modern legitimacy (Ordeix, 2013).

Groups and organizations strengthen their attitude when they commit themselves to aspects which interest or comprise the social activity of the city or country in which they operate. This identity and these values are often expressed through public activities, or through declarations of organized group principles, such as deontological norms or plans and reports pertaining to sustainability and social responsibility. The greater the number of public relations actions organized by a given company, the greater will be their legitimacy in the social arena. There is a certain fight to keep the opinion leaders' support in order to achieve more and more moral legitimacy.

We are using given legitimacy to reinforce core moral values of most representative organizations of the community. Many experts say that globalization means localization. One thing goes with the other. Opened organizations are more and more synergetic with local opinion leaders, especially those who are part of the close community.

But that does not mean that moral norms themselves are relativistic or culture-specific. The language and forms that a norm might take can be culturally determined. For instance, what counts for obligations towards employees and fair treatment may vary from country to country. The influences of the wider cultural environment are based on deeply rooted, fundamental values learned in early childhood; influences of the closer (organizational and professional) environment emanate from more superficial norms and rules relating to particular behaviors (Hofstede, 1985). Besides the impact of corporate norms on actual behaviors is strong or weak depending on local cultures (Guillon, 2008).

But even within the context of a particular culture companies cannot afford to think that once they have adopted a particular moral norm or voluntarily accepted certain moral obligations, the issue is settled for good. Because of the ongoing conversion about them, corporate moral values are always open for further criticism and debate. Thus there is no room left for permanent, static values, or limits to evolution. Isolated or artificially protected from changes, corporate moral standards become less effective in serving

their purpose of increasing public acceptance and make companies more vulnerable to negative exposure.

Emerging new opinion leaders create one of the most important concerns for public relations managers - to keep opinion leaders 'under control'. In the contemporary world of the online social networks this is becoming increasingly difficult: the reason has been explained by James Grunig (2006), professor at Maryland University, who defined activists as those who employ the net as their own means of communication. Those groups have a wide variety of sources of information to build up their arguments to become part of the agenda.

Having a list of key people with names of individuals and groups of influence and setting strategies to approach them is nowadays required in any PR practice (Ginesta & San Eugenio, 2013). Nevertheless, these groups can work against each other when they are competing for the same core values in terms of sustainability, equity and ethics, among others. When dealing with several publics/stakeholders we need to identify the opinion leaders who are acting against or for the general interest. Institutions, companies or other kinds of social organizations (for instance, No Government Organizations) like to have their own ambassadors spread all over the world to defend and fight for their causes. For example, the synergies established by the Catalonian soccer club, FC Barcelona, and the government of Qatar can be analyzed using this perspective. San Eugenio and Ginesta (2013) identify a country-branding strategy for Qatar when the Arabic country is using FC Barcelona as a social ambassador in Europe.

We cannot conceive that an organization could establish social commitments without having beforehand the right approach to fulfil certain social commitments with its stakeholders. It would be improbable to think of a company that expresses its attitude differently depending on the public, on the group or on the opinion leader.

The role of personal relationships is therefore fundamental in bearing testimony to an organization's public responsibility and as a step towards solid and coherent social responsibility. In this respect,

if we do not align individual and group interests, the ones affecting the closer environment and the broader, it is difficult to group concerns and satisfy expectations as an organization. It is clear that personal relationships present themselves as a weapon to combat discrepancies and promote consensus between groups within the society (Ordeix, 2013).

As internal relationships are of undoubted value for bringing cohesion to the organizational culture in order to better develop its attributes or differences, the same happens when the organization needs to adapt its messages to cultural reality, values and people. It is for this reason that Public Relations and communication processes aimed at all types of publics require significant amounts of knowledge of the principles, characteristics, composition and processes of both the organization and the society, especially when dealing in the area of social responsibility.

4. CONCLUSION

Moral norms either live or die in the real world based upon how well they survive the trials of interaction in real circumstances. A particular concept of corporate morality has a chance to become accepted as a widely shared and recognized standard only when it is evaluated in a varied environment, and is tested against various opinions; moral norms become accepted and functioning through communication of which they are a content. The principles themselves remain constant and universal; however, the form that they take is not absolute, because it is subject to actual circumstances which might change. These are suited for progression and improvement as human understanding of the world, and communication is improved.

As soon as opinion leaders manage to convince people that a particular corporate moral norm is in accord with their strong personal preferences, the norms become adopted in society: they become internalized by individuals and groups. Moral requirements become considered as true and given, forming the consciences. Moral norms that are recognized by society become the norms of

behavior that corporations are morally forced to follow. The ultimate result of this is the situation wherein certain moral norms, because of their wide acceptance, greatly reduce harmful activity of corporations.

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