



# Confronting the “corporate citizen”

## Shaping the discourse of corporate social responsibility

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – To demonstrate, through the application of Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis framework, that the discourse surrounding corporate social responsibility (CSR) has broader implications.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Argues that the evolution of CSR has become a two-way process of interaction between business and civil society.

**Findings** – As companies place increasing emphasis on their ability to act responsibly as “corporate citizens”, CSR provides new opportunities for social actors to assimilate these strategies; enabling them to scrutinise, question and oppose the business practices of global corporations and challenging them to prove that there is more to CSR than merely corporate rhetoric.

**Originality/value** – Demonstrates that the discourse surrounding CSR has broader implications.

**Keywords** Social responsibility, Sustainable development, Business ethics, Social accounting

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The recent Earth Summit, corporate scandals involving major multinationals such as Enron and the subsequent questioning of the regulatory structures and morality of global capitalism, all suggest that the complex relationship between business, the state and civil society is undergoing change. The debate, on this occasion, is being conducted under the rubric of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate citizenship. The development of CSR strategies has been particularly pressing for brand-based, multi-national companies such as Nike and The Gap. Greater public concern over their activities has highlighted the importance of protecting the brand-image, and the need to demonstrate a corporations’ socially responsible attitude in its interactions with consumers and suppliers in order to maintain its social capital (see Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

Debates about the social responsibilities of corporations are not new. However, the degree to which CSR has been embraced, represents a significant development in redefining the relationship between capital and civil society (Andriof *et al.*, 2002; Weiser and Zadek, 2000). Given the potentially wide-ranging impact of CSR, research in this field has adopted a relatively narrow focus, concentrating upon the positive and negative “business impacts” of firms deciding whether or not to instigate CSR strategies. In particular, four key themes are evident. First, the development of “the business case” whereby social responsibility represents an economic tool to gain competitive advantage and social capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Second, CSR as a method for global companies to develop strong links with the local communities in



which they operate. Third, CSR as a method for alleviating risk and the threat of damaging publicity (Cannon, 1994; Carroll, 1993; Solomon, 1997, 1999). Fourth, the process of “stakeholder management”, focusing in particular upon the identification and management of relationships with stakeholders beyond the traditional confines of shareholders and employees (see Blair, 1998; Donaldson and Preston, 1995).

In focusing upon these themes, much of this analysis rests upon the premise that CSR can be controlled and shaped predominantly by the business community (see Solomon, 1999; Himmelstein, 1997). Subsequently, considerable interest has focused upon management approaches towards the control of discourse and interaction between business and society, the use of relevant business information and knowledge in verifying social responsibility and the broader implications of this dimension to the company “bottom line”[1]. Within this context, CSR allows corporations to adopt the persona of global “corporate citizens” through greater interaction with civil society, more ethical business strategies and the provision of greater openness and access to information[2]. Engaging with and shaping this knowledge, it is argued, enables business to interact with the new social agenda from a position of strength and control.

This article, however, argues that much of the existing literature is misinterpreting and misunderstanding the complex processes of interaction and negotiation evolving between business, the state and civil society regarding CSR, by placing too much emphasis upon the ability of the business community to dominate, control and determine the parameters of these relationships. It draws upon critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the evolution of CSR and highlight the broader, more interactive and critical elements of CSR discourse. In particular, the article utilises Chouliaraki and Fairclough’s (1999) work on discourse in late modernity to develop a picture of CSR that involves multiple actors and is less about businesses “managing” stakeholders and more about the more challenging process of “stakeholder management” through engagement and dialogue. It argues that CSR is as much about the non-business environment as the business one and demonstrates that its institutional context necessarily includes agencies outside of business who are often viewed as more legitimate in terms of their social responsibility, reducing the business community’s ability to shape CSR discourse in a self-contained, bounded manner. The future direction of CSR, it is argued, may be strongly influenced by the ability of different actors to access and influence this dialogue.

By reflecting a more complex picture of interaction, challenge and exchange within CSR discourse, this article argues for a broader research agenda. The conception that the evolution of CSR is a process that should be primarily conducted and managed within business organisations or the business community is challenged, thus, questioning the assumption that CSR and “corporate citizenship” can be defined by, and for, the business community with little or no scrutiny or input from external actors.

In tackling these issues, the article will firstly examine the potential contribution of CDA to the understanding of CSR discourse. It highlights the importance of a dialectics of discourse within late modernity and the processes of appropriation and colonisation which are leading to a hybridisation of discourse of which the emerging field of CSR is a part. The article will argue that interaction, dialogue and struggle between different actors plays a central role within CSR discourse, and that this interactive element is largely missing from more business-centred interpretations. To demonstrate the potential for processes of agency and negotiation to impact upon CSR discourse, the

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article will highlight two examples in which the business community's ability to "manage" this discourse can be brought into question.

### **Adopting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to understanding the evolution of CSR**

At its heart, CDA rests upon the premise that the economic, social and cultural changes of late modernity exist as discourses as well as processes taking place outside of discourse. Chouliaraki and Fairclough, for example, argue that concepts are developed not only through actual processes of practical change but can also be "talked" into being and substantively shaped by discourse (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 4). Discourse is central to developments in late modernity as it provides a method for producing a simplified explanation for the complex economic and political relations within modern society. However, in creating this simplification, a process of selective inclusion and exclusion takes place, developing a specific interpretation of these processes and events.

CDA raises some important questions for understanding the discourse of CSR. In particular it highlights two key issues; firstly, identifying the way in which a discourse selectively translates events around it, and secondly, examining why that particular interpretation and discourse has gained predominance. As Fairclough suggests, with any form of discourse one always needs to ask 'why this particular selection and reduction, why here, why now?' (Fairclough, 2005a, p. 5).

In tackling these questions, Fairclough's work seeks to place discourse within its environmental context, linking its evolution to the power struggles existent within this environment. These power struggles provide the basis for a dialectical model within Fairclough's work. He argues that all practices produce a reflexive element, creating positioned knowledges which present a specific interpretation of the practice and the discourse accompanying it (see for example Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 26).. The way in which different positioned knowledges are presented, justified or dismissed and the context within which these positioned knowledges emerge are, for Fairclough, central to the dialectical struggle within discourse. By locating discourses within the context of social change, Chouliaraki and Fairclough argue, one can connect particular representations of the world with specific interests and relations of power.

Utilising this approach, one can interpret the debates around the social responsibilities of modern businesses as a process of dialectical struggle in which competing discourses seek to colonise and appropriate language, space and practices. Fairclough argues that changes in discourse are rarely the substitution of one discourse for another, but changes in relations between discourses creating a new articulation (Fairclough, 2005b, p. 7; see also Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). To understand the dialectical struggle, one must view discourse as a social practice and examine the relationship between a discursive event and the situations and structures which frame it. Discourse, therefore, is shaped both by the structures within which the developments take place but also by the agency of the actors seeking to influence it.

By examining CSR from Fairclough's perspective, i.e. why this discourse, why here, why now, one can develop insights into the ways businesses have sought to selectively reshape their image, translating their activities within a discourse of being socially and environmentally responsible actors. However, the appropriation of the language of social responsibility also opens the door for civil society groups to re-interpret CSR

discourse from their own perspective. The emphasis upon context within CDA highlights the potential for challenge that lies within CSR discourse, as actors compete in a dialectical struggle over language and meaning.

### **CDA, sustainable development discourse and the links with CSR**

Fairclough's analysis emphasises the "hybridity" of language as a consequence of the merging of different social fields and the mixing together of different genres and discourses. From this perspective, contemporary patterns of change are reflective of dialectical competition between discourses representing different interpretations and simplifications of the complex realities of modern life. Within this context both the discourses of sustainable development and CSR are reflective of Fairclough's arguments. Both reflect a process of transition within which social, ethical and environmental concerns have become central aspects in debates regarding the role of business in society, no longer easily dismissed as "externalities" with no direct bearing on business performance. Examples from the sustainable development field show the importance of controlling this discourse, especially when the concept is so open to contrasting definitions and interpretations.

Dryzek's work on environmental discourse, for example, is based upon the premise that discourses "help to constitute and re-constitute the world just as surely as do formal institutions or material economic forces" (Dryzek, 1997, p. 201). He argues that contemporary environmental debates focus less upon the existence of an environmental crisis per se, and more upon the nature of environmental responsibility, the predominant focus for that responsibility and the best methods for achieving it. Within this context, sustainable development has become the centrepiece for these debates. Dryzek, argues that debates around this discourse and the interpretation of sustainable development represents an important power struggle in the future direction of environmental action, involving:

different interests with different substantive concerns trying to stake their claims in the sustainable development territory. For if sustainable development is indeed emerging as a dominant discourse, astute actors recognise that the terms of this discourse should be cast in terms favourable to them (Dryzek, 1997, p. 124).

Reflecting aspects of Fairclough's CDA approach, he argues that the power of an actor to influence the sustainable development discourse represents a significant weapon in defining the parameters of environmental discourse and the responsibilities that will ultimately accompany it[3].

The work of both Dryzek (1997) and Hajer (1995), amongst others, provide useful examples of how the business community has sought to mould the discourse of sustainable development in a direction which complements their objectives, despite the origins of the concept having more far-reaching connotations. Indeed, the business community has been very effective in appropriating this language from the environmental movement through its focus upon ecological modernisation. By utilising Fairclough's approach it is possible to identify key factors which have enabled the business discourse of sustainable development to gain precedence over other interpretations). In particular, the discourse fits effectively within existing social structures, it accommodates a broad range of groups within its remit allowing it to

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develop a wide range of support, and has gained the backing and support of a broad range of powerful social agents (see Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999)[4].

A similar pattern is evident for CSR. While the impetus for more ethical business practice has arguably come from external forces, such as the anti-capitalist protests, CSR represents the business response to these concerns. Similar to sustainability, CSR is undoubtedly a strong example of the hybridity of discourse as companies have sought to appropriate the language of social responsibility, citizenship and ethics within their business plans. One could argue that the language of the “business case”, and the development of social and environmental reporting places a central emphasis upon socially responsible practice being a necessary part of a successful business strategy. The picture presented in this context is that CSR is naturally and inevitably ingrained within core business values.

Again, Fairclough’s analytical approach helps demonstrate why the language of CSR has proved so effective in responding to this ethical debate. First, it appears to complement the structural setting, which arguably includes governments seeking to withdraw from certain areas of social provision, the emphasis upon voluntarism, and the emphasis upon ethics and responsibility while maintaining profit. Second, the discourse has broad scope and reach, satisfying the concerns of the public for more ethical practices and greater transparency, being seen as part of a broader global strategy for sustainable practice. CSR is also definitionally vague, allowing it to appeal to a broad range of groups despite them having differing views on the actual parameters of the concept. It is hard for groups not to engage with this discourse, as this is interpreted as not wanting to seek viable solutions to in the face of concessions from the business community. Third, companies have been keen to adopt this language and portray themselves through this medium; for example, the expansion of reporting, ethical issues in advertising and support of national and international governmental bodies gives it a strong voice.

The business response to the anti-capitalist and anti-corporate campaigns of the 1990s, through the emergence and adoption of the language of social responsibility, has therefore, produced a significant form of hybrid discourse designed to quell concerns over the ethical nature of business practice. Engagement with others and policy development is being conducted within this framework, which suggests that businesses can manage this process largely for themselves within a framework of their own choosing – one which emphasises responsibility while maintaining profitability and places the responsibility upon the voluntary actions of “good” companies rather than seeking to create a regulatory framework to enforce such good behaviour. In terms of CSR we are seeing an embrace of the social and environmental discourse by companies seeking to gain credibility as respectable and responsible actors.

In the same way in which businesses have been relatively successful in adapting to the environmental discourse of sustainability, (against which they were the major culprits at Rio but were one of the major proponents by Johannesburg), the ethical challenges highlighted in recent years have been confronted by a new discourse on social responsibility within business – posited by the business community themselves. In both cases, a challenge that initially rested upon questioning the very foundations of the role of the multinational has been transformed into a discourse in which business has a predominant role in producing the long-term solutions.

However, presuming that CSR represents a discourse that is entirely the realm of the business community creates a false picture of the hybridisation of discourse. Chouliaraki and Fairclough note that hybridity represents not only a struggle for domination but also a process of resistance (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 15). It is this aspect of discourse as resistance which, we argue, is currently lacking from much of the analysis of CSR.

In seeking to adopt and hybridise a discourse focused upon social and environmental responsibility, the discourse of CSR opens up a broader debate about the social and ethical responsibilities of modern firms. In particular, it raises issues regarding the transparency of company activities, the role of stakeholders beyond the traditional shareholder community and the commitments that companies have to the communities in which they operate. By incorporating these aspects of social and ethical concern into business strategy companies are entering into a discourse in which they are not necessarily viewed as the most credible actors. Their ability to dominate this discourse comes into question when faced with alternative interpretations from groups often viewed by the public as having greater credibility regarding environmental and social issues[5]. As such, we argue, the very process of utilising CSR discourse has opened new avenues for debate and “resistance”, creating new channels of potential influence on business.

To highlight the competing perspectives surrounding CSR, and the ways in which CSR discourse is offering new opportunities for influence, this article discusses two specific examples. The first, the responses to the EU Green Paper on CSR, focuses upon the opportunities offered through open engagement and dialogue and demonstrates the competing perspectives which surround current CSR debates. The second illustrates the ways in which anti-corporate campaign groups are utilising the current trend for greater transparency and openness amongst companies to challenge business discourse and practice.

### **Divisions in responses to the EU Green Paper**

A key process within the emergence of CSR has been the challenge for businesses to engage in consultation and dialogue with a stakeholder community that potentially extends far beyond the traditional boundaries of its shareholders, and TUs. Often, these forms of dialogue are used as evidence that contemporary firms are starting to take their social and environmental responsibilities more seriously. Stakeholder dialogue offers an opportunity for business to demonstrate what they have achieved so far, to get support for internally-instigated CSR initiatives, and to strengthen their “license to operate” (see Lawrence, 2002). This use of stakeholder dialogue lends some weight to the perception that the impetus for change is emerging largely from an internal commitment deriving from the businesses themselves. As Shell’s “People, Planet and Profits” report exemplifies:

We affect – and are affected by – many different groups of people, our stakeholders. We aim to recognise their interest in our business and to listen and respond to them (Shell, 2001, p. 42).

However, on closer examination, it is apparent that the perception of a good “corporate citizen”, varies considerably between and within businesses, NGOs and governments. If anything the process of negotiation and dialogue has served to highlight the lack of

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clear definition regarding what a socially responsible firm actually is and should be doing, and the best method for encouraging firms to undertake this.

The range of voices and interpretations surrounding CSR discourse was highlighted during the consultation procedure accompanying the publication of the EU Green Paper on CSR in July 2001 (European Commission, 2001). The Green Paper was designed to act as a starting point in shaping the EU's actions within this sphere and to "involve companies in a partnership with the social partners, NGOs, local authorities and bodies that manage social services so as to strengthen their social responsibility" (European Commission, 2001, p. 6). The Commission invited all social partners to respond to the ideas and questions raised by the Green Paper and provided a web site to display responses ([http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/soc-dial/csr](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/soc-dial/csr))[6].

As the discussion below will demonstrate, the responses highlight many of the core debates, divisions and obstacles facing the development of CSR discourse and demonstrates that for many "stakeholders", their perception of the roles and responsibilities of the "corporate citizen" stretch far beyond the parameters currently being championed by various sections of the business community. The discussion here will provide a flavour of the potential challenges facing the evolution of CSR discourse.

Discussions regarding the definition of CSR demonstrated the potential breadth of the parameters encompassed within this discourse. Significant divisions were evident regarding the emphasis placed within the Green Paper on the different dimensions of CSR. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI), for example, were highly critical of what it perceived as the Green Paper's interpretation of "social" as "industrial relations". It argued that:

From a Commission perspective therefore CSR is about employee involvement structures; dialogue with staff and unions over restructuring; work-life balance; equal opportunities; and life-long learning. CBI members have expressed deep concern over this, since the public debate on CSR has largely focused on such areas as environmental sustainability; community outreach; supply chain management; corporate governance; aspects of human resources management; and core labour standards in developing countries (CBI Response, 2002).

However, the broader interpretation was strongly supported by trade union and NGO responses; the General Municipal and Boilermakers Union (GMB, response 2002) for example, claiming that any CSR "must be based on the development of quality employment, with the ongoing development of workers' skills and qualifications through training and lifelong learning". Clearly there is potential here for a broad interpretation of CSR to encompass a significant cross section of internal company practices far beyond the dimensions considered relevant by the business community. CSR in this context is not just about "external", becoming a good "corporate citizen" may potentially involve businesses having to consider more closely the social responsibilities it has to the whole of its workforce and the input of stakeholders into business practices.

The issue of regulation, unsurprisingly, also proved to be divisive, suggesting that the business community may face a strong and persistent challenge against its insistence that CSR remain a voluntary and business-led activity. Responses to this issue in many ways reflect the very heart of the differing perceptions of what CSR is about, where the impetus for these developments is coming from, and how best to get companies to commit themselves to socially responsible strategies and actions.

Businesses were keen to support the Green Paper's definition of CSR which recognised it as "a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment" (European Commission, 2001, p. 5). In many cases, it was argued that the impetus for CSR had emerged from voluntary actions of companies, without interference from government.

The so-called "business case" for CSR embodies the claim that it is better for business to integrate CSR into their policies than to ignore it. Effective change, it is suggested, has not been achieved by appealing to the "social conscience" of business but rather by demonstrating the "business case" for adopting CSR; namely competitive advantage and the lessening of the risks to a company's good reputation. A number of responses appeared to prioritise this explanation for the commitment to CSR strategies among the business community[7]. Given this, it was suggested that any form of regulation would ultimately only serve to reduce the competitive advantage offered by an innovative CSR strategy and thus act as a disincentive for companies ever to go beyond the basic minimum standard. Because the concept of CSR is still evolving, businesses also claimed that it was too early to seek to provide an overall legislative framework within which to fit the vastly divergent issues:

CSR is an evolving agenda. Issues can be subjective, intangible and, we believe, are difficult to address properly through a "one size fits all" framework. Companies should be allowed sufficient latitude to define the CSR issues most relevant to their own business and social/environmental context, and develop their own integrated CSR strategy (Barclays response, 2002).

To summarise, one gains from the business community responses, a clear perception that the continued development of effective CSR strategies relies upon the maintenance of a voluntary structure, which recognises the impetus for CSR as coming from within the business community itself. Such an approach would subsequently allow for diversity in strategy development, the publicising of the business case for adopting CSR within business practice and the continued dissemination of best practice to demonstrate the competitive advantage that such strategies provide. In this way, businesses will highlight the value of being an effective "corporate citizen", and by necessity others will subsequently seek to develop this role.

Other respondents however, failed to share this optimistic view. First, it was argued that little tangible evidence existed to support the argument that CSR legislation was an unnecessary burden. Second, it is not the sole realm of the business community to decide what its social roles and responsibilities ought to be. The GMB (Response, 2002) expressed concern that if CSR remained a purely voluntary process, a potentially powerful strategy could merely become "the vehicle for soft law and company self-regulation". Similarly New Economic Foundation (NEF, Response, 2002) expressed a concern that the Green Paper "implies that companies must voluntarily choose to contribute to a better society and cleaner environment, rather than ensuring companies do so by law".

Considerable scepticism was expressed regarding the power of the "business case" alone as an impetus for action by firms; suggesting that consumer power and concern over potential risk was not always enough to encourage companies to be socially responsible. For example, "many companies continue to 'do well' in the absence of 'doing good'" (NEF Response, 2002). While voluntary measures served to encourage those who were enthusiastic "corporate citizens", they achieved little in tackling those

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who did not live up to their social responsibilities. Consumer pressure, it was argued, may result in some changes to company policy but it would not produce wholesale commitment to socially responsible action, especially where direct relationships with consumers were not so apparent. Regulation, rather than being damaging to companies already active in this arena, would protect those companies seriously committed to CSR against those who were not (GMB Response, 2002). This interpretation clearly identifies CSR as an obligation on all firms to be enforced, rather than an “optional extra”, which companies with a social conscience might choose to engage in.

Responses from NGOs also emphasised the importance of independent reporting and verification of CSR practices. It was apparent in many of these responses that CSR should focus more upon what businesses do than what they say; a case of “deeds not words”. Many were concerned about how the current discourse would ensure the implementation of CSR strategies and what would be done about those who refused to even join the debate. The reporting of CSR has indeed been a controversial issue, not in relation to whether or not business should report, but how they do this, what they reveal and to whom. Responses to this issue showed that while the business community is largely championing the voluntary provision of information as a key aspect of CSR, for other groups the principal debate rests not with whether or not information is being provided but concerns the creation of clearer rules regarding what this information says and who evaluates its validity.

While businesses have tended to emphasise the importance of the availability of information from the firm ahead of any process of standardisation, NGOs have argued that without some form of regulation, standardisation and control, CSR reporting would remain relatively meaningless and could potentially become merely another marketing strategy:

... selectively written by PR departments, incomparable across companies and meaningless as a tool of accountability or risk management for stakeholders (NEF Response, 2002)[8].

A number of respondents also identified the reporting process as a key area within which greater stakeholder involvement should be encouraged. NEF (Response, 2002) stated that “the primary beneficiary of CSR practices should be the stakeholders who are impacted by a company’s operations”. It argued that while shareholders and employees may already possess a framework for consultation, “other stakeholders, namely communities, casual employees or NGOs, are rarely consulted in a formalised way”. The GMB, similarly argued that all reporting and auditing of companies’ CSR strategies and social reports should be conducted independently with the involvement of all stakeholders.

While businesses were equally keen to emphasise the importance of the development of an emerging new relationship between business and civil society – one which the CBI defined as moving from “recognition to engagement to partnership,” – once again it was clearly stated that this engagement represented an initiative from business that was entered into voluntarily. As a consequence, this engagement should be determined by the business community, not imposed upon it:

Just as companies should be allowed to define CSR according to their own needs, so they should be left to determine not only who their key stakeholders are, but also how those relationships are managed (CBI Response, 2002).

As a result, no formal roles should be given to NGOs and community groups other than those that have been ascribed to them by business[9]. As will be highlighted later, this stance may not remain possible; with increasing public access to information and research on corporate practice, via the activities of a broad range of pressure groups, companies themselves are not always initiating the process of information dissemination but are often responding to claims and criticisms of their actions made by others.

The EU consultation raises many questions regarding the future direction of CSR discourse. As this example demonstrates there is a divergent perception of where CSR is actually heading and what the outcomes for business and civil society may be. Timms' (2001) research suggests that, although there is a level of convergence regarding the importance to business of "corporate citizenship", "no subsequent agreement can be identified with regards to the actual behaviour involved in being a good corporate citizen" (Timms, 2001, p. 15).

Being able to shape the future direction of this discourse clearly has important implications, both with regard to the future legislative requirements and voluntary commitments and also to the potential roles of other stakeholders and businesses obligations to them. As the above discussion shows, the current debates surrounding CSR are crucial in defining who controls the pace of development in this field, the actors involved, and the parameters of the commitments. Obviously, there is a strong case for business to undertake action voluntarily, at a level it can control, rather than to face having more stringent regulation imposed upon it. However, how far should it be willing to compromise with the demands of external stakeholders in order to avoid the threat of regulation? The pressures emanating from this dialogue are undoubtedly pushing businesses away from merely a reliance on being seen to be "Good Citizens" towards having to prove this through the reporting process, independently verified or not.

A question mark also remains regarding how far the process of dialogue remains "optional" for the business community, and to what extent it can identify and select its own stakeholders. There is clearly pressure to show that business should not have a choice about whether to engage with stakeholders or not, but rather, as "corporate citizens", have a direct responsibility to do so. Under these conditions, the concept of being able to selectively identify and manage relationships with stakeholders is clearly under pressure from a more extensive requirement for stakeholder engagement and dialogue.

### **Watching the corporations: CSR and direct action campaigning**

As mentioned earlier, the hybridisation of discourse and the appropriation of language offers new opportunities for challenge and resistance. The rise of the anti-capitalist protest movement during the 1990s reflected an important change in protest activity away from a focus upon national governments and towards the global capitalist system and the institutions that support it such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and World Bank. The recent experiences of the McLibel trial, campaigns against Shell concerning the Brent Spa oil platform, the plight of the Ngoni people in Nigeria, and the "No Sweat" campaigns launched against Nike, The Gap and other major clothing manufacturers, highlight the damage that large scale protest and

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campaigning can cause to the brand image and to the perception of that companies voice as a respected actor.

These new social movements represent not only a “social voice” in the stakeholder dialogue process, but have also created an effective information and protest network to challenge the environmental and social discourse presented by corporations. For example, the McLibel trial led to the subsequent creation of the McSpotlight web site (available at: [www.mcspotlight.org](http://www.mcspotlight.org)) which now covers issues concerning McDonald’s activities, and those of other multinational corporations, across the globe becoming a vastly popular web site[10]. Similarly, campaigns against Nike in US universities sparked an international campaign against sweatshop labour and produced the international Clean Clothes Campaign (see Timms, 2001)[11]. As these campaigns have developed the level of scrutiny and information collated on companies’ activities, often on a global scale, has created significant pressure for the companies to justify their actions and a new range of competing voices exposing a different picture to the discourse presented by the companies themselves.

Campaigns such as these raise important questions regarding the power of the “business voice” to successfully appropriate the language of social responsibility. Klein (2002) for example, suggests that we are witnessing a transition in which consumers are no longer willing to detach themselves from the broader global activities and practices of the manufacturers and brands which they consume. Ethical consumerism has become a significant aspect of the contemporary global market, with increasing pressure on business to disclose detailed information to the consumer, and significant risks for those who find that campaign organisations are disclosing information that had not been made public.

A combination of an expanding attempt by business to reduce this risk through greater openness and the increasingly advanced technological methods of campaign groups, therefore creates another set of significant pressures and challenges to the ability of the business community to control the discourse surrounding its social and environmental responsibilities. In particular it highlights the dangers for business of identifying CSR discourse as largely another form of PR rhetoric.

In confronting these protests companies have sought to present a more open and accountable image of themselves, often through the development of CSR programmes, detailed environmental and social reporting etc. However, there remains a lack of trust regarding the validity, accuracy and independence of this reporting, as highlighted earlier. At the same time, the increasing use of modern communication technologies by campaign organisations has meant that the reports provided by the companies are no longer necessarily the primary source of information available on the organisation. Research conducted by one group is transferred, utilised validated and recycled by other organisations. As Klein demonstrates:

Each day, information about Nike flows freely via E-mail between the US National Labor Committee and Campaign for Labor Rights; the Dutch-based Clean Clothes Campaign; the Australian Fairwear Campaign; the Hong Kong-based Asian Monitoring and Resource Centre; the British Labour Behind the Label Coalition and Christian Aid; the French Agir Ici and Artisans du Monde; the German Wekstatt Okonomie; the Belgian Les Magasins de Monde – to name but a few of the players (Klein, 2000, p. 393).

As well as campaigns against individual corporations, recent years have witnessed the growth of campaign organisations and web sites designed to collate a broad range of

information regarding corporate activities[12]. These campaign organisations provide a range of information and resources regarding company claims and activities, as well as acting as a focal point for submitting and developing a global perspective on these issues. They produce detailed company profiles in direct competition with the companies' own social and environmental reports, often examining directly claims made in these reports[13]. Companies have found that a large corporate PR budget is not always able to counteract the level of global scrutiny now being provided by these organisations.

As well as reporting on the activities of corporations, campaign web sites also provide active guidance for researching into company activities. As the CorporateWatch guide states:

... the success or failure of your campaign will crucially depend on the information at your disposal ... Anyone can find out about a company, with just a little time and imagination and its extremely satisfying to feel you've stitched up a company just by getting to know it better ([www.corporatewatch.org.uk/publications/diy\\_research\\_2002](http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/publications/diy_research_2002)).

Recent direct action protests have witnessed a transition away from focusing lobbying activity towards the state and more towards the "champions" of the corporate world. Within this context, companies are increasingly becoming seen as valid targets. The expanding amount of information and claims being made by businesses through CSR dialogue, therefore, potentially opens them up to direct criticism should they turn out to be heavy on rhetoric.

CSR as it evolves within this environment, cannot just be about providing information, but ultimately must also address the validity and coverage of information being produced. Under these conditions, the extent to which business is free to determine how far their commitments to CSR can be largely PR rhetoric or a more credible attempt to be more open and transparent, again may not necessarily be completely within their control. How much information they may want to reveal may not necessarily equate to how much they may have to reveal in order to avoid the potential risks of damaging publicity, which the closer scrutiny of inaccurate claims may produce.

### **Conclusion**

There is a significant business trend in the current climate to integrate the discourse of CSR into their activities in an attempt to be seen as progressive global social actors and to suppress, or offset, the risk of bad publicity caused by anti-corporate campaigning[14]. However, by adopting a CDA approach to this field, this article has argued that the discourse of CSR is not one that is purely the realm of the business community. The language of, and claims to being, a good "corporate citizen" lays companies open to evaluation and scrutiny from outside the firm; whether that be in the form of regulation and audits at the state level, through CSR multi-stakeholder forums or through scrutiny and criticisms from external campaign groups. As Andriof and Waddock (2002, p. 23) note, the "corporate citizenship" process is "significantly more interactive" than previous forms of social responsibility and social philanthropy. As a consequence, there is more than one credible voice seeking to define the roles and responsibilities of a good "Corporate Citizen" and therefore impacting upon the evolution of CSR discourse.

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While companies have been quick to embrace CSR because of its voluntary and “business case” led framework, the parameters of CSR discourse encroach upon the spheres of Trade Union and NGO concerns, restricting the extent to which business can develop these strategies in relative isolation. Civil society organisations carry legitimacy and expertise in the field and may often represent to consumers a form of “social and environmental watchdog”, giving their interpretation and position a level of credibility not matched by business, especially given that consumer confidence has been hit by the scandals and unethical practices revealed in recent years.

NGOs and Trade Unions are undoubtedly looking for more from CSR discourse than merely voluntary business initiatives. They are themselves keen to derive the maximum value from this policy area and push for a transition from a voluntaristic, business-led CSR to a regulated, tested and civil society grounded practice of social and environmental accountability. Consequently, the level of impact these groups can develop in influencing the role of government and regulation, both national and global, will become a significant dimension to the development of this discourse.

While the power of the business lobby is strong and is reflected in its ability to colonise and appropriate the language of social and environmental responsibility through CSR, the lessons of CDA suggest that it would be unwise to underestimate the agency of other social groups and their power to shape and influence the nature and practice of a discourse such as CSR. Companies may seek to select the stakeholders they engage with but this will not necessarily give them control over the discourse that surrounds it. As Carrol and Buckholtz acknowledge:

... management must perceive its stakeholders as not only those groups that management thinks have some stake in the firm but also as those groups that themselves think they have a stake in the firm (Carrol and Buckholtz, 2000, p. 66).

Even when they are excluded from the formal debates, the “alternative voices” surrounding CSR have developed an effective communication and information network; functioning as an alternative media, allowing them to publicise where corporations are failing to meet relevant standards. In many cases these groups are themselves defining the standards to be met, extending them beyond the commitments being identified by the corporations themselves. Given these pressures and challenges, the evolution of CSR discourse is unlikely to be purely based around the ability of companies to define and shape their responsibilities and make a value of their social and environmental roles.

Action such as this, inevitably forces the business community to interact with “alternative voices” and suggests that the notion of being able to effectively “manage” stakeholder relations in order to reduce potential risk, may have significant limitations (Burchell and Cook, 2006). As a result, the shaping of CSR discourse will be far more of a two-way process of pressure, negotiation and learning regarding what should be expected of the contemporary “corporate citizen”.

It is essential to recognise, however, that while social agency is fundamental to understanding the development of CSR discourse, this process must be examined alongside structural and organisational constraints which mediate access, knowledge and the power to make your discourse stick. However, CDA recognises that even if the dominant groups is able to gain relative control over a new discourse, the appropriation of a different discourse inevitably leads to changed expectations and

with it changed strategies and parameters for action and debate. The challenge for future analysis of CSR discourse, therefore, is to develop an analysis which is reflective of these different dynamics; whereby the capacity of civil society actors to shape the debates and parameters of CSR discourse is balanced against the ability of the more powerful corporate voices to cast the discourse of social and environmental responsibility in terms more favourable to them.

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### Notes

1. For example, see World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2002).
2. See Carrol, 1993; Pearson, 1995; Solomon, 1999; Sklair, 2001.
3. Dryzek also notes that recalcitrant actors may also seek to “cloak” themselves in the relevant discourse rather than directly challenging it, in the hope of maintaining their own public image whilst also influencing the shaping of that discourse.
4. The outcomes of the Johannesburg summit were arguably the strongest example of the business discourse on sustainability gaining increasing credibility.
5. This dynamic is reflective of Giddens’ discussion of the changing relationship between technical and ethical expert systems within late modernity.
6. All quotations that are taken from the Commission web site listed in the article. For ease of referencing where responses are quoted directly, only the name of the company will be listed, rather than the full web address.
7. BiTC argued that the prime purpose was “not to achieve social objectives but to deliver the business objective of minimising costs and increasing profitability” (BiTC Response, 2002).
8. NEF identified the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) as an example of good practice as it had the basis to provide a level of standardised reporting which fulfilled both the needs of stakeholders and business.
9. In the realm of company reporting, this was reflected in the claims that how reports were verified, who was involved in verification and how information was distributed was a matter for companies to decide and not for outside bodies to impose (See Institute of Directors Response, 2002; CBI Response, 2002).
10. By 2002 it had been accessed over 65 million times (McSpotlight web site, 2002, available at: [www.mcspotlight.org](http://www.mcspotlight.org)).
11. Reflected in the CBI’s Green Paper response: “Consumers today may be hesitant about buying a product from a company perceived to be complicit in human rights abuses; shareholders and investors may be wary about investing in a company with a dubious environmental record; and employees may be loath to work for a company that ignores the needs of the local community in which it operates” (CBI response, 2002).
12. These vary from campaigns focused upon specific industries such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, Behind the Label (both focused upon clothing industry), and Project Underground (oil and mining industries), to much broader campaigns providing information on a cross section of corporations such as Multinational Monitor, Oneworld.net and Corporatewatch.
13. For example, in the Clean Clothes Campaign’s Nike Case File, Nike’s Code of Conduct regarding wages and conditions for workers is quoted directly, the study then examines these claims in relation to wages for workers in Indonesia, Vietnam, El Salvador etc. A similar level of scrutiny is undertaken regarding the Code of Conduct’s commitments on overtime, rights to collective bargaining and many other aspects ([www.cleanclothes.org/companies/nikecase99-11-1.htm](http://www.cleanclothes.org/companies/nikecase99-11-1.htm)).

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14. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 demonstrated this process most effectively, with major multinationals keen to publicise their social and environmental credentials at a global level (See Burchell and Lightfoot, 2003).

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