



The Myth of Corporate Social Responsibility

David Crowther
London Metropolitan University, UK

Rute Abreu
Fátima David
Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão da Guarda, Portugal



Nota Introdutória

A Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão (ESTG) do Instituto Politécnico da Guarda (IPG) congratula-se pelo facto do Professor Doutor *David Crowther*, da *London Metropolitan University*, Reino Unido ter aceite o convite para realizar uma visita de trabalho e investigação científica a decorrer entre os dias 9 a 15 de Novembro de 2002. Temos a certeza que com esta visita será possível desenvolver um debate privilegiado entre toda a comunidade Docente e Discente.

É igualmente um enorme privilégio dar início à série *Estudos e Documentos de Trabalho* com seis *papers* da autoria do Professor David Crowther. Esperemos que este seja o estímulo e o incentivo que falta para que, em particular a comunidade académica da ESTG, apresente trabalhos científicos que estimulem a discussão científica.

Não se poderá deixar de agradecer à Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia que, através do Fundo de Apoio à Comunidade Científica, generosamente aceitou a nossa candidatura, bem como todos aqueles que directa e indirectamente contribuíram para a sua concretização.

Constantino Rei

Professor Doutor do Departamento de Gestão
Director da Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do IPG

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por

David Crowther

London Metropolitan University, UK

Rute Abreu

Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do Instituto Politécnico da Guarda, Portugal

Fátima David

Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do Instituto Politécnico da Guarda, Portugal

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David Crowther, London Metropolitan University, UK

Rute Abreu*, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do IPGuarda, Portugal

Fátima David, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do IPGuarda, Portugal

Abstract

Most corporations in the world are currently trying to distance themselves from the excesses and misbehaviours which have been manifest in recent years by those corporations which have been symbolised as *rogue* corporations. Many would consider that these corporations have however behaved no differently to most others and have merely been found out. Nevertheless the distancing of the rogues from the rest has led to a tremendous resurgence of interest in behaviour which has been classified as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). So, corporations are busy repackaging their behaviour as CSR and redesignating their spinmasters as Directors of CSR, for there is much evidence that little has changed in corporate behaviour except for this repackaging – the power of the semiotic being far more potent in the modern world than the power of actual action, and also obviating the need for such action.

It is a central argument of this paper that CSR is a myth. So, the myth is founded on the arrogance of corporate managers, due to failures in Agency Theory; predicated in the ignorance of interpreters of corporate activity, dazzled by the power of the semiotic; and which legitimates corporate expropriation on an undiminished scale. This research will discuss the social contract between corporations and society; the perspective of stakeholder context; the dialectics of organisational performance; the Agency Theory and CSR; the measurement and evaluation of performance; and the accountability for performance. CSR involved a wide range of concepts, principals, methodologies and a large diversity of empirical analysis. The corporate excesses, which are starting to become disclosed and which are affecting large numbers of people, have raised an awareness of the social behaviours of corporations. This is one reason why the issue of corporate social responsibility has become a much more prominent feature of the corporate landscape. There are probably many reasons for the attention given to this phenomenon not least of which is the corporate excesses witnessed in recent years.

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Correspondence address: Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão da Guarda, Av. Dr. Francisco Sá Carneiro, 50 - ESTG - Gab. 50, 6300-559 Guarda, Portugal

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) involved a wide range of concepts, principals, methodologies and a large diversity of empirical analysis. In recent years, the concept of CSR has gained prominence to such an extent that it seems ubiquitous, both in the popular media and among academics from a wide range of disciplines. There are probably many reasons for the attention given to this phenomenon not least of which is the corporate excesses witnessed in recent years. For many people the various examples of this kind of behaviour – ranging from Union Carbide Corporation, to Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), to Parmalat, to Enron as well as to the collapse of Arthur Andersen – will have left an indelible impression among people that all is not well with the corporate world and that there are problems¹ which need to be addressed (Crowther & Rayman-Bacchus, 2004a).

Most corporations in the world are currently trying to distance themselves from the excesses and misbehaviours which have been manifest in recent years by those corporations which have been symbolised as *rogue* corporations. Many would consider that these corporations have however behaved no differently to most others and have merely been found out. Nevertheless the distancing of the rogues from the rest has led to a tremendous resurgence of interest in behaviour which has been classified as CSR. So, corporations are busy repackaging their behaviour as CSR and redesignating their spinmasters as Directors of CSR, for there is much evidence that little has changed in corporate behaviour except for this repackaging – the power of the semiotic being far more potent in the modern world than the power of actual action, and also obviating the need for such action.

Crowther & Rayman-Bacchus (2004a) have argued that the corporate excesses, which are starting to become disclosed and which are affecting large numbers of people, have raised an awareness of the social behaviours of corporations. This is one reason why the issue of corporate social responsibility has become a much more prominent feature of the corporate landscape. There are other factors which have helped raise this issue to prominence and Topal & Crowther (2004) maintain that a concern with the effects of bioengineering² and genetic modifications of nature is also an issue which is arising general concern. At a different level of analysis Crowther (2000, 2002b, 2002c) has argued that the availability of the World Wide Web has facilitated the dissemination of information and has enabled more pressure to be brought upon corporations by their various stakeholders. But, Wheeler & Elkington (2001: 1) talk about the end of corporate environmental report due to the fact that historically this report have not engaged stakeholders and it will appear to be

“the development of truly interactive (cybernetic) corporate sustainability and communications delivered via the internet and other channels.”

¹ As Feeney (2005: 1) explains:

“... is a mistake to pursue rapid reforms in weak governance zones for the benefit of foreign investors and the private sector if reforms to improve respect for civil and political rights and the overall administration of justice are not pursued with equal vigour.”

² In the words of Granat (2001: 1):

“bioengineering is a developing speciality featuring a multidisciplinary approach to the solution of problems in medicine and biology, based on the application of advances in science, engineering and technology. A major focus for bioengineering is to improve the quality of life of people with medical conditions that restrict independent living and integration within the community.”

Another point of view, about the diffusion of information and its impact³, was presented by Unerman & Bennette (2004). They explain the difficulties in identifying all stakeholders that are affected by a corporation's activity. All these perspectives, therefore raises the question as to what exactly is CSR and how can it be manifest and to what exactly can be considered to be corporate social responsibility. According to the EU (2001b: 8; 2002: 5):

"...CSR is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis."

From these concepts, we could infer that the social enterprise is not a new definition and has resonance with earlier idea such as those of Dahl (1972: 18), who stated:

"...every large corporation should be thought of as a social enterprise; that is an entity whose existence and decisions can be justified insofar as they serve public or social purposes."

Shaw (2004: 196) explains that the principal characteristics of social enterprise are:

- i) the orientation, "...directly involved in producing goods and providing services to the market, making an operating surplus...."
- ii) the aim, "...explicit social aims (job creation, training or provision local services), strong social values and mission (commitment to local capacity building), accountable to their members and wider community for their social, environmental and economic impact⁴. The profits are to their stakeholders or for benefit the community."
- iii) and the ownership, "...autonomous organizations with loose governance and participation of stakeholders in the ownership structure."

All definitions – and there are many - seem to have a commonality in that they are based upon a concern with more than profitability and returns to shareholders. Indeed involving other stakeholders, and considering them in decision-making is a central platform of CSR. The broadest definition of corporate social responsibility is concerned with what is – or should be – the relationship between the global corporation, governments of countries and individual citizens. For example, the OECD has studied investment in weak governance zones⁵. More locally, the concept of CSR is concerned with the relationship between a corporation and the local community in which it resides or operates. Other case was Timberland, which logged 44,000 community service hours during the three-year period and US recognition⁶ for its commitment to social responsibility (Austin et al., 2004). Another concept of CSR is concerned with the relationship between a corporation and its stakeholders. In this situation, the research could be focused on employees (see Parker, 1977). The corporation develops its codes of conduct that could

³ Unerman & Bennette (2004: 702) explain the interactive ways that the financial report could present. For them:

"...it is not possible to ascertain from the web forum (i.e. it is a mechanism to ensure movement towards inter subjective acceptance by all stakeholders of the corporate responsibilities recognised) the extent to which postings have actually affected corporate decisions ..."

⁴ An empirical study concerning the operational reporting of corporate natural assets (i.e., habitats, fauna and flora) can be seen in Jones (2003).

⁵ Following the external inputs invitation, till 28 February 2005, the concept is that:

"... in some investment environments, public authorities are unwilling or unable to protect rights (including property rights) and to provide basic public services (e.g. social programmes, infrastructure development and prudential surveillance). These "government failures" lead to broader failures in political, economic and civic institutions that the project refers to as "weak governance"." (OECD, 2005).

⁶ Recognition included a corporate conscience award from the council on economic priorities and public accolades from Presidents Bush and Clinton (Austin et al., 2004).

make some progress in improving labour rules and process, but the scope are limited and it is unclear if they can make a significant impact without the help of Governments with law-enforcement. These efforts are likely to benefit only a small segment of the target workforce⁷.

For the authors all of these definitions are pertinent and represent a dimension of the issue. A parallel debate is taking place in the arena of ethics as to whether corporations should be controlled through increased regulation or whether the ethical base of citizenship has been lost and needs replacing before socially responsible behaviour will ensue. For example, Fülöp et al. (2000) state that people in Hungary often comment that ethics in the Hungarian economic life is a delusion rather than a reality⁸. However this debate is represented it seems that it is concerned with some sort of social contract between corporations and society.

The social contract

This social contract implies some form of altruistic behaviour – the converse of selfishness. Self-interest connotes selfishness, and since the Middle Ages has informed a number of important philosophical, political and economic propositions. Among these is Hobbes's world where unfettered self-interest is expected to lead to social devastation. A high degree of regulation is prescribed in order to avoid such a disastrous outcome, but in the process corporations sacrifice all the rights (human, labour, social) for others. Self-interest again raises its head in the utilitarian perspective as championed by Bentham, Locke and John Stuart Mill⁹. The latter for example advocated as morally right the pursuit of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. This perception, as Phillips (2001: 51-52) describes, could mean

“... there is no longer serious market resistance to the market economy, understood as an arena in which firms compete and co-operate on the basis of free contractual arrangements. Applying market principles to the internal operations of firms is the next logical step ...”.

Similarly, Adam Smith's free-market economics is predicated on competing self-interest. These influential ideas put interest of the individual above interest of the collective. Indeed, from this perspective, collective interests are best served through self-interest. At the same time this corporate self-interest has come to draw disapproval in modern times, as reflected in many of the arguments within this book. The moral value of individualism has all but vanished.

Crowther & Rayman Bacchus (2004b) suggest that the pendulum swung too far towards encouraging corporate self-interest at the expense of the public interest. For example, in Portugal, there were specific changes in taxation¹⁰ made by different

⁷ See for example OECD (2000a, 2000b) and Scherrer & Greven (2001).

⁸ An Islamic perspective on business ethics can be seen in Pomezanz (2004).

⁹ Along with Bentham, John Stuart Mill, as a nineteenth century English philosophy developed the Utilitarianism, which was the contention that man should judge everything in life based upon its ability to promote the greatest individual happiness (Titus & Smith, 1974).

¹⁰ All changes as an opportunity to pay previously unpaid taxes and with guaranteed from penalties and court prosecution made by the Portuguese government to fight tax evasion and/or in an effort to raise additional revenue, in consequence of budget deficit.

governments allowing a fiscal amnesty¹¹ and delay of payment to football teams. Indeed the continuing conversion of public service provision to market testing by many governments suggests a strengthening belief that the two interests are not in conflict. Self-interest and altruism (promoting the welfare of others over self) need not be in conflict. There is ample evidence that encouraging corporate self-interest (and risk taking) does indeed benefit society (albeit unequally from a Marxist perspective). Some of that evidence is however contested, as in the case of Genetically Modified (GM) food (see Topal & Crowther, 2004). The European Union (EU) policies¹² intend to pursue a high level of protection of human life and health, but differences between national laws, regulations and administrative provisions concerning the assessment and authorization of GM food and feed may hinder their free movement, creating conditions of unequal and unfair competition (EU, 2003). There is also abundant evidence to the contrary; that the pursuit of corporate self-interest continues to burden society with additional costs. In the agriculture area examples could be foot and mouth disease, with higher level of costs not very well estimated till now. Nevertheless, during the last two decades most of the world's nations have set about creating anew, or refining, (capitalist) economic and political institutions that encourage corporate self-interest.

Stakeholder concern

With the raising of CSR to prominence in society however all companies have claimed to be concerned with a variety of stakeholders and take their needs into considering in strategic decision making. For example, the research conducted by Cooper et al. (2001) in UK shows that certain stakeholders are claimed to be considered by all organisations. These are shareholders, customers and employees, with suppliers and society and the environment also being considered important by the majority of companies. In the other hand, Heard & Bolce (1981: 248) explain that some pressure groups increase the influence of social report:

“... organizations have been instrumental in calling attention to issues such as product quality and safety, environmental protection (...) have had a substantial impact on the development of social measurement and social reporting.”.

Although CSR involves a concern with the various stakeholders to a business there are several problems with this research in identifying socially responsible behaviour:

- The research shows that the concern is primarily with those stakeholders who have power to influence the organisation. Thus organisations are most concerned with shareholders, less so with customers and employees and very little with society and the environment;
- The research does not indicate the extent to which any action is taken and the extent to which this is voluntary;
- Claiming a concern is very different to actually exhibiting that concern through actions taken (Crowther, 2004).

¹¹ In Rego et al. (2003: 91), an anonymous answer to the survey explains that:

“it should not be allowed fiscal forgive. Everybody should pay taxes. It was fundamental that courts works very well. It should be publishing the name of firms that did not pay to its suppliers and others.”.

¹² During the last years, EU develop several documents about genetically modified food and feed, because the process itself is not safety (see EU, 2001a, 2003, 2004).

It therefore becomes imperative at this point to consider what is meant by any definition of CSR. There are three basic principles (Crowther, 2002a; Schaltegger et al., 1996) which need to be considered sustainability¹³, accountability and transparency. In this sense, Eccles et al. (2001: 163) presents the words of Delfgaauw, as Shell's vice president of sustainable development, that argues

"... new responsibilities bring new accountabilities. Sustainability is the substance, transparency the process."

One theme which arises from any consideration of these principles is the extent to which it is possible to assess the accountability of organisations to a broader constituency by reference to an implicit or hypothetical social contract. In the process, it is attempted to show how social contract theory also helps bind the relationship between corporate social responsibility and ethical behaviour. As Shaw (2004: 196) states, one of the characteristics of social entrepreneurs is being ethical as a way to

"... ensure that public money is well used, that ideas are not corrupted by vested interests and that their full commitment is available for the project."

This raises questions about the scope and depth of commitment among corporate leaders to social responsibility, a point which is central to this paper. Assessing this commitment is made difficult¹⁴ given what appears to be a runaway free market ideology; a belief system that seems to be elevating the corporation above the nation state, and is being transmitted through corporate global expansion and with USA led government sponsorship. This can be developed in the context of the globalising process by considering the extent to which corporate and social exploitation of Internet technology is helping both corporate bodies and consumer and citizens transform our world into a global village (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968) and then broadened to consider the broader relationship between technological innovation and social change. In examining this relationship it can be shown that technological development is underpinned by a utilitarian perspective, and at the same time technological change is unavoidably bound up with making moral choices.

While governments and consumers alike look to business to continue delivering economic and social benefits, many observers remain concerned about corporate self-interest; a self-interest that is synonymous with those of the managers. Managerial self-interest is unavoidably driven by a combination of shareholder interests (backed up by markets for corporate control and managerial talent), and occupational rewards and career opportunity. The public interest is easily sacrificed on the altar of these managerial motivators (or constraints). So, as Jensen & Meckling (1994: 1) argue:

"understanding human behaviour is fundamental to understanding how organizations function, whether they be profit-making firms in the private sector, non-profit enterprises or government agencies intended to serve the 'public interest'."

Moreover, public interest is not homogeneous and therefore cannot be simply represented. Public interest has become factionalised into constituencies and stakeholder groupings, each concerned with their particular interests. Consider for example the 'not-in-my-back-yard' protests over the building of recycling plants and mobile telephone masts,

¹³ For a empirical perspective of creating a process-based model that structures existing indicators of sustainable development see Isaksson & Garvare (2003).

¹⁴ See Crowther (2004) for any argument that there is little such commitment; Crowther & Jatana (2005) for an exploration of this in the context of managerial egotism; Andersson & Pearson (1999) for argument concerning the incivility in the workplace and growing challenge of relationship mediated by high-tech, asynchronous and global interaction.

yet opinion polls support the former and sales of mobile phones demand more of the latter. Parkinson (2003) explains in the continental European tradition, as Portugal, corporations (like: *Galp*¹⁵ and *Caixa Geral de Depósitos*¹⁶) are regarded as partially public bodies, with constituencies that extend beyond the shareholders to include other groups, such as employees (with retirement plans and other benefits), trade unions (with strikes and public contest) and local communities (with social and economic needs).

It has often been noted, from a global perspective, that corporate self-interest seems to be associated with an unequal distribution of economic and social benefits. However, it seems unfair to lay the responsibility for such inequality solely at the door of the corporation. National and regional politics, religious conviction and differentiated moral values all play an immeasurable role in shaping a nation's life chances. Nevertheless there is worldwide suspicion that corporate egoism is a significant (if not the most important) influence on economic and social development. For example, in an OECD (2003) study about anti-corruption management and reporting practices, the results show that corporations have different behaviour, depending on their sector of operation. Most extractive industry corporations (8 out of the 12 oil and mining companies in the sample) publish lengthy anti-corruption statements. In contrast, only one out of 13 in the sample motor vehicle company publishes any material whatsoever.

Beyond this tendency, many examples of corporations behaving altruistically, from the paternalism of nineteenth and twentieth century industrialists¹⁷, to modern day donations to charities and the ad hoc secondment of managers to community projects¹⁸. The perceived value of such giving is tainted by suspicions that many such acts seem self-serving. Thus there is room to ask whether Microsoft is giving away computers out of altruism or as part of an aim to reinforce its brand name. Many modern projects of altruism are tied to the purchase of products from the giving corporation. Other initiatives are clearly pushing at the boundaries of acceptable corporate behaviour, such as donations to political parties. These examples show that corporate altruism covers a wide range of socially acceptable behaviour, from selfless giving to self-interested giving.

Perhaps one reason for corporate self-interest being such a mixed blessing is that people are overly reliant on evaluating the consequences of corporate action, especially apparent in the fixation with the bottom line. Nothing concentrates the managerial mind like performance targets and outcomes. As Wilbur (1992) argues, self-interest encompasses not just consequences and results, but also requires freedom of choice and consistency. From this perspective the pursuit of corporate (self-interested) activity should be guided by structured alternatives and consistency, in order to ensure that the self-interest of others is not undermined by selfish action. Sensing that the citizen cannot rely on corporate altruism so, the public are demanding our governments to initiate more legislation and tighter regulation. However, even this move has shown important weaknesses. Many of the politicians and policy makers are in the pockets of business. Self-interest is even here, and it is not acceptable to us. These arguments cast doubt on the extent to which citizens are able to arrange our economic and political institutions in order to harness self-interest to the benefit of society. The functioning of a civilised society

¹⁵ *Galp* is the bigger Portuguese oil and petrochemicals corporation owned by the Portuguese State.

¹⁶ *Caixa Geral de Depósitos* is the bigger traditional financial institution owned by the Portuguese State.

¹⁷ See Crowther (2002a).

¹⁸ Other such actions which are taken to be representations of corporate social responsibility.

includes putting the interests of others before self-interest. As Baron et al. (1992) and Mansbridge (1990) observed, altruism is part of social, political and economic life. However, the exploitative nature of capitalism sits uncomfortably with Kant's (1959) ideal of mutual respect for the interests of others, and even less with Rawls's (1971) desire to see a strong form of egalitarian liberalism. These tensions (between capitalism and liberalism, and between meeting unconditional social obligations and the pursuit of economic value), drives the need for constant vigilance of corporate activity. Since, we are unlikely to abandon capitalism, nor escape from the fixation on performance measurement, managerial commitment to upholding the interests of others could straightforwardly be included in the managerial performance appraisal (Crowther & Rayman-Bacchus, 2004b).

Alongside the broad recognition that corporations are accountable to their stakeholders has come a development of the principles upon which this demonstration of accountability should be based. So, annual reports and other media are used to the specific interest of some groups. As Zeghal & Ahmed (1990) present, the other media could be in detail as several narratives or quantified reports, supplements to the annual report or produced at interim dates, booklets or leaflets produced to address the social activities of the corporation, advertisements or articles published detailing corporation's activities and labelling of products to promote environmental and/or other concerns. Inevitably, this is predicated in accounting as a mechanism by which such action can be measured and reported. In generic terms, this has come to be called either social or environmental accounting.¹⁹ The objective of environmental accounting is to measure the effects of the actions of the organisation upon the environment and to report upon those effects. In other words, the objective is to incorporate the effect of the activities of the firm upon externalities and to view the firm as a network which extends beyond just the internal environment to include the whole environment (see Crowther, 2000, 2002a). In this view of the organisation the accounting for the firm does not stop at the organisational boundary but extends beyond to include not just the business environment in which it operates but also the whole social environment. Environmental accounting therefore adds a new dimension to the role of accounting for an organisation because of its emphasis upon accounting for external effects of the organisation's activities. In doing so this provides a recognition that, the organisation is an integral part of society, rather than a self contained entity which has only an indirect relationship with society at large. This self-containment has been the traditional view taken by an organisation as far as their relationship with society at large is concerned, with interaction being only by means of resource acquisition and sales of finished products or services. Recognition of this closely intertwined relationship of mutual interdependency between the organisation and society at large, when reflected in the accounting of the organisation, can help bring about a closer, and possibly more harmonious, relationship between the organisation and society. Given that the managers and workers of an organisation are also stakeholders in that society in other capacities, such as consumers, citizens and inhabitants, this reinforces the mutual interdependency.

¹⁹ Although among academics the terms social accounting and environmental accounting are deemed to denote different aspects of responsible accounting, among practitioners the terms tend to be treated as synonymous and generally called environmental accounting. This approach has been followed here.

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ESTUDOS E DOCUMENTOS DE TRABALHO

Número	Autor	Título
Ano 2002		
01/02	David Crowther	No accounting for fashion: the flawed quest for shareholder value
02/02	David Crowther	The poetics of corporate reporting: evidence from the UK water industry
03/02	David Crowther	Three bites of the cherry? Performance measurement in the UK electricity industry and the effects of industry structure
04/02	David Crowther	A semiology of corporate reporting
05/02	David Crowther	The importance of Corporate Social Responsibility
06/02	David Crowther	The theology of managerial superordinancy
Ano 2003		
01/03	David, Fátima Abreu, Rute Marques, Pedro	Income Tax: an overview of the Portuguese situation
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Ano 2004		
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03/04	David, Fátima Abreu, Rute	Social Responsibility: Reality and Illusion?
Ano 2005		
01/05	Crowther, David Abreu, Rute David, Fátima	The Myth of Corporate Social Responsibility

Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão da Guarda

Av. Dr. Francisco Sá Carneiro, 50

6300-559 Guarda

Tel. 271 220 120 | Fax 271 220 150

www.estg.ipg.pt