

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON BUSINESS, THE INTERNET, AND ETHICS

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Abstract

This essay considers the ethical responsibilities of businesses in a world that has become globalized but remains unbalanced and faces a number of profound risks. In a world of limited resources, businesses must operate sustainably. They must respect cultural and moral diversity and protect and foster community and economic development, especially in relation to the bottom two billion humans living in poverty. Firms should adopt an asset development rather than a cost-minimization or profit-maximization approach as their business strategy. The essay considers a number of practical ways of operating to realize these objectives, with regard to matters as diverse as labour practices, security issues, transfer pricing, supplier relations, infrastructural needs, and government relations.

A number of ethical issues have been raised with respect to the uses and abuses of the ever increasing possibilities associated with the global development of the Internet. These include topics related to intellectual property rights, invasion of privacy, censorship, shaming, and basic lack of access. Other topics include issues related to the reliability of Internet information, identity theft, Internet security, Internet addiction, plagiarism, and financial scams. I will focus on these and other issue at the end of this paper. In the meantime, in order to gain greater understanding about how to think about – and act responsibly in relation to – these issues, I will initially adopt a global perspective on these matters and then see what light might be shed on these issues from a value-added model of international business ethics (1).

Living in a Globalized, Unbalanced, and Risky world

We are living in a world that is globalized, unbalanced, and risky. As we attempt to think about ethical issues associated with the Internet, it is important to reflect upon the larger global context in which we find ourselves. As we gain a sense of this larger picture, we also obtain a clearer idea both how to define and how to assign priority to the various ethical issues associated with the uses and possibilities of the Internet.

When we say that our world is now globalized, we mean to communicate several different but related ideas. We talk of globalization in order to indicate, one, how much more interconnected humans have become. This interconnection is a by-product of a number of different developments. Some of these globalizing forces, such as development of intercontinental commerce and the missionary expansion of Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism, have steadily increased over the last millennium and more. Some of the globalizing forces, such as the expansion and improvement of long distant transportation and the modern migration of peoples, have been developing steadily over the past several centuries. The pace and the reach of globalization have been

augmented over the past several hundred years by the increasing levels of international commerce and trade. Although there was a burst of world commerce in the half century before the First World War, global commerce has especially expanded in the half century after the Second World War. When thinking about globalizing forces, it is important not to overlook the role played by aggressive imperial forces. Many diverse peoples have been brought into closer inter-relationship as a result of political and economic expansion of the Turkish, Russian/Soviet, Spanish, French, British, and American spheres of influence (2). These forces have been in play for a number of centuries. Over the past 150 years, interconnections between distant peoples have been facilitated by a number of new developments in communication technologies. These include the telegraph, international postal systems, the telephone, long distance cables, television, satellite-relayed communications, and now the Internet.

Several of these globalizing forces – the distance-spanning and interconnecting influence of modern commerce, transportation systems, and communication media – are closely interwoven with another phenomenon, integrally related to them, namely the development of modern industry and business. Modern commerce, transportation, and communication media are in part by-products of modern industry. They also act to extend the possibilities and influence of modern industry. Correspondingly, although modern industry itself and modern businesses are not globalizing forces as such, they have shaped and affected the character of these globalizing forces. Modern industry and businesses have found ways to make more productive use of human and natural resources. In the process, they have helped to raise standards of living for billions of humans. The modern world is clearly a world of nation states, because the dominant and prevailing political jurisdictions are nation states rather than (as often in the past) villages, cities, tribes, manors, and empires. Nonetheless, fifty of the largest economies in the world belong to businesses while 50 belong to nation states.

As a result of the influence of these several globalizing forces – the missionary religions, the migration of peoples, the expansion of the European colonial empires, the development of modern commerce, transportation, and communication, the contemporary globalized world exhibits a number of characteristic features. I will mention several features that seem important when we begin thinking about Internet ethics. For example, one, there have emerged a number of global languages – languages used in many different countries and settings, distant from the locale where they were first used. These include Arabic, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Han (Chinese), Russian, and English. Two, there have been vast increases in the amounts of information that is being created, has been collected, and can be comparatively easily accessed. Correspondingly, the role of information – including the ways it is stored, arranged, communicated, and utilized – plays an ever more influential and decisive role in diverse areas of modern life including politics, industry, the development of energy, and practice of medicine. Three, the forces of globalization have made humans ever more aware of the diversity of human cultures. As people in the North Atlantic countries became conscious of this cultural diversity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they also attempted to make sense of it, sometimes in quite problematic ways, as Hegel did when he treated other cultures as less advanced.

The recognition of cultural, and therefore ethical, diversity remains a challenge that has yet to be fully appreciated and addressed.

Three, globalization has in the past century assumed, as well, an emerging civil and semi-political expression with the creation of a number of world-governing, world-connecting associations and organizations. I have in mind here the establishment and role of organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (with respect to Prisoners of War and Geneva Conventions), The World Health Organization, The International Atomic Energy Association, The World Wildlife Association, the World Court, The International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. These associations variously establish global norms and activate and mobilize people from varied countries to act on behalf of common objectives. All of these organizations establish policies and norms with which national governments are expected to comply. This is true for the international organizations already cited as well as groups like the United Nations, the High Commission of Refugees, the World Bank, and the International Labour Organization. Peoples from diverse countries are inter-connected as well through a host of religious and civil society associations – groups like UNICEF, Amnesty International, the World Economic Forum, the Roman Catholic Church, The World Council of Churches – as well as international trade and international industry associations – like the Kimberly Agreement among firms involved in diamond mining and diamond selling, the Global Compact among businesses generally, and the International Olympic Committee. We could easily name many other associations, gatherings, and councils which exercise some form of global public authority. These associations share in common the following traits: they are comprised of people from many different countries; they seek to foster cooperation among people from around the world; and they establish and seek to gain compliance with particular international policies and norms. The number of these organizations has greatly increased during the past couple of generations.

We use the words global and globalization to refer to a variety of forces and organizations that have functioned to increase the number and intensity of the social connections that link people from different cultures and nations. In addition, we use the words global and globalization to describe a mind set, a way of thinking about the world. To adopt a global mind set means to look at the world as a whole, to view particular issues and concerns in terms of their relationship with this whole. To think globally is to think broadly and to look for and recognize these kinds of larger inter-relationships. The opposite of global thinking is to think in exclusive and parochial terms. To think and act “globally” also entails viewing particular issues in terms of their relationship with and impacts upon the earth as a whole including all of the organic and inorganic systems which are part of the earth. Some observers have referred to this larger whole as the biosphere or the “commonwealth of life.” However, the earth includes more than what these terms refer to, encompassing as well both its mineral bases and atmospheric heights. In any case, to adopt a global perspective involves assuming responsibility to care for or help take care of this earth-bound whole. It means recognizing that as humans we are part of, and interact with, a larger earthly reality, which we are dependent upon and which we

affect by how we live. Accordingly, we use the term globalization to refer to the degree to which various groups and communities, over time, have moved themselves to adopt this mind set and have, correspondingly, altered and extended their horizons and points of reference to embrace a truly global, earth-grounded perspective. As a result, many groups and communities have become more concerned about environmental issues and sustainable practices in business and personal ways of living. It follows then that the forces of globalization refer not only to developments which inter-connect diverse people in multiple ways but also to developments that lead people to think more globally about their own lives and agendas.

Over the course of the past generation the world we live in has become both more globalized and more unbalanced. In spite of the recent developments in electronic communication, world commerce, and inter-governmental collaborations, the world is far from balanced and far from flat. Today about 2.3 billion humans have incomes of less than \$2/day. That means that one in three humans lives in poverty. As a whole these people live shorter lives: more than seventeen year less on the average than those with moderate incomes. They are more likely to experience poor health, to suffer higher rates of infant mortality, to live in the midst of violence, and to receive less education. They are less likely to be able to cushion risks with insurance and to be able to access credit. They are more likely to feel powerless. About half of these people live in the 60 least developed countries. These countries, most of which are in Africa and Central Asia but include as well Haiti, are not working well at all. They seem trapped by cycles of violence, bad government, and their own poverty (3). The other half of these impoverished people live in rural areas of countries like China, India, Mexico, and Brazil; in the slums growing around and within big cities throughout the developing and industrialized worlds; and in impoverished indigenous communities.

To be sure, as a result of economic development and industrialization, rates of poverty have declined over the past century. This is worth noting because this decline means that millions are living longer, receiving more education, enjoying better diets, and residing in healthy circumstances. However, because the numbers of humans have steadily grown, the number affected by poverty has not changed much. It is true that 400 million fewer people experience absolute poverty with incomes of less than \$1/day than two decades ago. Almost all of this gain has occurred as a result of economic growth in China and India. However, over these decades in much of Latin America, Eastern Europe, The Pacific, and Sub-Saharan Africa the situation has gotten worse or stayed much the same. At the same time, the relative status of the poor has been aggravated by growing inequality, both within countries and between countries. As those with wealth have gotten richer, average income levels of the poor have fallen (4).

In a world with as much wealth as there is today, why do so many people live in poverty? Although there are other factors, overwhelmingly people are impoverished because they live in economies that are impoverished. They live in slums, rural districts, nations, and regions whose economies do not produce enough opportunities for work or sufficiently well-paying jobs. As a result households in these areas cannot adequately meet their basic needs for sustenance and shelter, education and decent living. In many cases these economies

are situated geographically in difficult settings with inadequate access to basic natural resources. In many cases, these economies have suffered from natural disasters or temporary economic downturns. In practically all cases, compared to economies that have expanded as a result of the growth of commerce and industry, these impoverished economies remain under-productive. To be sure, for centuries many, many humans lived in these kinds of economies: And they lived shorter lives and more meagre existences. It is important to underline this point: Most people are poor because they happen to live in impoverished economies. There is such a tendency to moralize about poverty – to blame it on the poor themselves or on their leaders, that we often overlook this basic economic fact. Thus, if we want to reduce poverty, then we must find ways of making these impoverished economies work better (5).

Our contemporary world faces a number of risks, which cannot be ignored. Because humans are now more closely interconnected, we are more vulnerable to the spread of infectious diseases. Globally, humans face increased risk from climate change and environmental degradation. Although some populations are at greater risk than others, as a whole the insecurity of humans is affected by the deforestation and desertification of large areas, the reduction in the extent of arable lands, and the lowering of water tables and diminishing quantity of water in aquifers. As the overall climate of the earth warms, we face the risk both of rising sea levels and dramatic changes in ocean currents, both of which changes would adversely affect the life chances of millions of humans. In addition to these environmental risks, we face a range of political risks, associated especially with the wide spread resort to violence by militant dissidents, disadvantaged social groups, semi-organized gangs, and nation states which in various ways feel threatened by local insurrectionaries. There are on-going violent civil conflicts in several dozen contemporary countries, some overtly experienced and some experienced as threats which from time to time break out into actual attacks. In many cases civilians have become the targets of these attacks. For many people the sense of threat is aggravated by the fact that so many countries now possess or seem capable of developing extraordinarily lethal weapons, including nuclear bombs as well as chemical and biological weapons. In addition to these quite serious and sizeable environmental and political threats, the processes of industrialization bring with them not only enhanced standards of living but also a number of economic risks. These include both the threat of periodic economic depressions and bouts of inflation, which may be managed in ways that reduce or aggravate the distress of the households adversely affected, as well as the threats of income loss through unemployment, old age and accidents, which are variously managed in many developed, but few under-developed, countries through social insurance programs.

In many ways the contemporary world has become more globalized. It remains an unbalanced and risky world. It is as well a world of many distinct communities, countries, cultures, religions, and economies. Although these groups may interact in diverse ways, and affect and be affected by each other in various ways, these groupings remain distinct and serve as the reference bases for personal identity and the objects of considerable loyalty. Because of the increased interconnectedness, especially as this has been occasioned by modern communication and commerce, some observers have argued that we are living in an increasingly

borderless world. Given the degree to which most people live within in distinct communities (as well as nations, cultures, religions, and economies), and given the extent to which these groupings have established authoritative forms of self-governing to manage their group life, it seems inappropriate to describe the worlds as borderless. It is probably more accurate to describe our world as one in which some kind of border-crossing can now be managed with greater ease.

As we attempt to identify the issues and contours of a responsible Internet business ethics, we are well-advised to begin thinking globally and taking seriously the larger context in which both these new modes of business and communication arise as well the ethical issues they occasion. The larger context is one of a globalized world that continues to be constituted by many diverse communities, a world that remains in specific ways unbalanced and faces a range of identifiable risks.

Responsible Business Practices.

How do we best think about the ethical responsibilities of business?

One response is captured by the belief that businesses should be socially responsible. Businesses should increase their philanthropic giving and social investments. They should help to address social problems like poverty, hunger, and the AIDS crisis. They should become greener. They should especially steer clear of certain questionable practices like uses of forced labour. In a phrase: They should become morally good organizations. Often those who advocate this view argue that businesses should focus less on their profits and their bottom line. Or stated somewhat differently, they allow the concerns for social and environmental issue to modify their strictly business interests. There is much to recommend this position (6). It has been championed by many groups (7).

However, this view of business responsibility has been subject to a number of weighty critiques. Businesses are, after all, businesses not social welfare agencies. They do not especially have expertise in social problems. In any case, firms have an important and basic fiduciary responsibility to their customers, employees, creditors, and share holders. These groups expect businesses to be good at their business so that these groups will in turn benefit appropriately from their corresponding investments. Often in their effort to be, or appear to be, socially responsible, firms have undertaken initiatives that put themselves and their stakeholders at excessive risks (8). For example, Levi Strauss in the mid-nineties refused to work with suppliers in China because of human rights violations in that country. Later, recognizing in part the huge market from which they were excluding themselves, the firm found it had to reverse this position. This was too good of an opportunity to miss out on. In any case, from the perspective of the developing world, what these communities need most are initiatives that will help their impoverished economies to grow. Social projects add less overall value than business operations that foster economic development.

Many of those who criticize the view that businesses should become socially responsible do so because they have adopted the polar opposite position: namely that, in the words of Milton Friedman, “The

social responsibility of business is to increase its profit.” In practice, in developing areas, this approach has often led international businesses to seek to minimize their costs – with respect to labor, operations, taxes, and supplies. Whether these firms were extracting, harvesting, fabricating, or assembling, typically many such businesses have attempted to further their overall interests by reducing their expenses. This view of business has been widespread. To be sure, it makes sense to conserve expenses as one important concern among a number of others. However, pre-occupation with cost-minimization, especially when business people focus on short terms results, often leads to cutting corners. Correspondingly, there are many accounts in the developing world of underpaid and overworked laborers, employees forced to work in unsafe and unhealthy conditions, ravaged environments, and firms using clever but dubious accounting practices to avoid local taxes (9). All these practices result from narrow-minded efforts to reduce costs and maximize short term returns.

In fact, if this approach to business is too strictly followed, it exposes firms to a number of risks. These include the obvious risk of engendering disaffected and therefore underperforming workers – with high turnover rates. Cost minimizing strategies also raise the risk of giving rise to disaffected consumers, who do not want to buy products made by firms regarded as morally corrupt. (10) There are also the risks of getting caught bending laws or accounting principles. Firms regarded as exploiters also face greater security risks, as they are more likely to become targets for acts of vandalism and sabotage. In several cases, firms have faced the additional risk of angry investors selling off their shares when firms were exposed as being complicit with human right abuses. So, to a degree, a strictly bottom line approach to business in the developing world can become risky business (11).

I propose a third way of thinking about the ethical responsibilities of businesses, which I refer to as the value-added approach. In order to explain what I mean by a value-added view of business interests, it is useful to begin by looking at what firms are as social organizations. Briefly-stated, businesses are organizations that utilize human and natural resources in order to produce and market goods and services. Furthermore, in so far as they stay in business, we can add that businesses are wealth creating organizations. Firms add economic value in the form of profits, wages, interests, as well as useable commodities and services. In order to do these things – that is, add economic value, businesses put into motion a series of on-going wealth-creating interactions with their stakeholders. Stakeholders typically include employees, creditors, customers, suppliers, shareholders, and affected communities. It is often said that businesses *have* stakeholders. This way of discussing stakeholders is not in fact accurate because it makes it seem as if firms could exist independent of their stakeholders. But they cannot. Firms do not strictly have stakeholders. Rather, firms are constituted by their interactions with their stakeholders. Firms cannot stay in businesses without these ongoing interactions (12).

A value-added approach to the bottom line seeks to protect and enhance the overall economic value of firms as they are embodied in the varied assets associated with these several sets of interactions. These assets take a number of different forms. For the purpose of analysis, we can distinguish between five different kinds

of assets. These include, one, financial assets, which include income and shares; two, productive assets, which include physical operations and organizational structures; three, human assets, which refer to the skills and dispositions of workers; four, social assets, which refer to social trust and networks; and, five, natural assets (13). Overall, a firm is genuinely creating wealth if, as it utilizes and modifies these various assets, it adds to and does not deplete them. To be sure, firms draw upon and add to some assets more than others. A firm may become imbalanced in how it utilizes, uses up, conserves, and adds to particular assets. A value-added perspective calls for firms to keep track of the overall state of the assets with which they are working. This perspective requires firms to gauge how well they are protecting, conserving or depleting these assets. Businesses in the extractive industries face a special challenge, because, by the very nature of what they do, they are using up certain natural assets. The following case might be made with respect to businesses in the extractive industries: These firms may overall add economic value, even though they do in fact deplete some resources, such as underground fossil fuel reserves, if they correspondingly add value by expanding financial, human, productive, and/or social assets, and do not measurably deplete other natural assets.

As I describe this value-added approach to business, I am making a crucial assumption. I am assuming that as firms interact with their several stakeholders, they engage in fair exchanges. That is, on both sides, I am assuming that these exchanges meet the following minimal criteria: They are voluntary, based upon adequate and reliable information, and benefit each partner in ways that are roughly proportionate to contributions and efforts each makes and the risks each faces. These are the minimal ingredients of what has traditionally been called “commutative justice.” To the extent that businesses interact with their stakeholders on the basis of fair exchanges then as businesses grow their assets, they correspondingly add economic value to the larger society to the degree their immediate stakeholders benefit from these exchanges. Let me add: It makes sense for businesses to engage in fair exchanges with stakeholders both for moral reasons, because it is just, and for reasons of self-interest. Because fair interactions with stakeholders are mutually beneficial, stakeholders are likely to act in ways that add more value (14). I can illustrate this point with respect to employees. When, for example, employees feel their interests are not well respected, they act differently to the disadvantage of their employers. Turnover, absentee, and tardiness rates increase; employees are much more likely to work to rule and to do sloppy and careless work. Productivity drops markedly. Moreover, when firms introduce regimentation and surveillance to address these problems, workers typically react in ways that intensify these negative rates and traits (15).

It is important to observe that the firm may well produce profits while running down their productive assets – allowing both their machinery and their organizational operations to deteriorate. Firms may also produce profits while running down their natural assets by depleting them, and running down their human assets by abusive labor practices. No matter how sizeable their profit margins or their market niches, firms do not add economic value if their overall economic value decreases because of appreciable declines in the value of the productive, human, social, and/or natural assets with which they are working.

This value-added approach to responsible business practices has special relevance to developing areas. Businesses in these areas can and should think of their business interests not in terms of minimizing their costs but in terms of protecting and developing their assets and thereby adding economic value. Moreover, they should think of their assets broadly in terms of the ways their interactions with their stakeholders work with and variously add to or deplete their overall store of financial, productive, human, social, and natural resources. When international businesses operate in these ways, they correspondingly add economic value to these developing areas. They have done so by providing jobs and income, chances to learn new skills, taxes, stimulus for other businesses, and valued goods and services. As the economies of these areas have grown, the rates of poverty have declined.

This value-added approach to business ethics provides a useful point of reference to begin thinking of issues and concerns that might characterize the field of Internet business ethics. In broad terms, ethically responsible businesses are expected to add and not deplete economic value and they are expected to interact with their stakeholders on the basis of open, reciprocating, and fair exchanges. Correspondingly, they are expected to comply with local and international law as well as widely accepted accounting standards.

Ethical Issues Related to the Use of the Internet

Before listing and discussing a number of ethical issues that have arisen with regard to the use of the Internet, I would like to call attention to three quite different forms in which ethical issues generally arise: namely, one, as deviations in behaviour from obligatory standards; two, as short falls from aspiration standards or standards of excellence; and, three, as genuine dilemmas with regard to morally well-defended alternatives. Depending upon the form in which issues arise, quite different kinds of responses are called for. While strict rules, prohibitions, and punishments work quite well with respect to issues that assume the form of deviations from obligatory standards, these responses do not work very well with regard either to short falls or dilemmas. Short falls are often best addressed through encouragement, peer support, and opportunities to learn and to try again. In turn, dilemmas are typically best addressed through debates, discussions, further research, explorations of not yet imagined alternatives, negotiations, and hard-bargaining. Because people often fail to appreciate the form – or combination of forms – in which ethical issues arise, they typically respond in ways that complicate the issues at hand.

A number of different ethical issues have arisen with regard to the use of the Internet. I will list and discuss a number of issues, noting in the process the forms in which these issues typically arise.

1. Ethical issues of access to the Internet.

Many people lack any access or have very little access. These people are denied access for many of the following reasons: they lack the necessary equipment; sources of electricity are absent or irregular; they cannot easily gain assistance in the use and repair of their equipment; broadband connections are lacking; and/or they

lack the skills fully and effectively to use their equipment. This lack of access is an issue of fundamental justice, further reinforcing inequalities in an unbalanced world. In this context fair access represents a valued-objective that seems to be both an aspirational goal and a social minimum that ought to be generally available. In many ways this issue cannot be adequately or appropriately addressed without addressing the issues related to the corresponding problems of poverty, which affect at least one in three humans. Compared to the other issues, which I will also review, this issue is especially pressing because of the ways it further marginalizes the poor. In circular ways, expanding Internet access in impoverished areas may well work to foster and facilitate economic expansion in these regions just as broadly-based economic development in turn is clearly correlated with increased Internet accessibility. This particular ethical issue is probably best addressed both directly, through special projects aimed at extending accessibility, and indirectly through initiatives at promoting economic growth generally.

In some areas full access to the Internet is blocked through selective censorship. In particular, a number of people have objected to the way Internet server firms like Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft agreed to comply with the policies of the Chinese government to remove from Internet sites located in China reference to certain terms like equality, Tiananmen Square, and human rights. This issue appears more like a complicated dilemma, in which considerations about local laws, timing of protests, and the search for imaginative alternatives all play a part.

2. Ethical issues related to the odious uses of the Internet

I use the term odious uses to refer to a number of practices that violate basic national and international laws and/or fundamental moral principles. In so far as possible, these uses should be eliminated or greatly reduced. Some of these abusive practices cause more damage than others. In most cases, there are no easy ways to curtail these abuses. In some cases, it is easier to develop protective responses – like antivirus software – than to detect and eliminate the abusive practices themselves. All of the following represent examples of odious uses: the use of the Internet, often by governments, to secure private information; identity theft by use of the Internet; and malicious acts of sabotage to interfere with or damage information systems belonging to others. While most people consider these practices wrong, there is less consensus with regard to several other practices, such as, for example, the problem of flight capital. The developing world loses many billion dollars every year through abusive transfer pricing, miss-pricing schemes, bribery, and the private pocketing of public and corporate funds (16). Much of these funds are transferred electronically to offshore banking centers. From the perspective of the developing world these fleeing funds represent a huge cost to their economies. The practice of transferring these funds electronically represents in many ways the odious use of a good and legitimate means. It seems fitting to call attention to this problem, even if the fitting response might have more to do with changes in tax laws in the industrialized societies rather than any alterations in the status and rules of Internet use.

3. Ethical issues related to what might best be described as questionable practices

These questionable Internet uses are not as potentially harmful as odious practices. In most cases, these questionable practices represent activities that were wide-spread before the Internet, but the Internet seems to have extended and multiplied their uses. For the most part direct legal action is not likely to alter these practices in any major ways. With respect to these questionable practices in particular, it is important to use our imagination and to collaborate with others to arrive at constructive responses to these issues. Many of the questionable practices have to do with the ways people use the Internet to send messages. In particular I have in mind uses of the Internet to shame others, to pass along malicious rumours, to distribute pornography, to seek out victims for financial scams, to disseminate widely provocative but not well-established evidence, and to pass along hearsay as fact. The Internet allows these kinds of morally questionable messages to be sent to more people in less time than by means of traditional communications. Most importantly, the Internet allows people to disperse widely information that has not first been reviewed, reflected upon, and edited by third parties positioned to think about the intelligibility of these messages and how they are likely to be received. In a globalized world with an overload of information, these kinds of third parties can play a vital role in helping to distinguish trivia from matters of importance and in helping senders to articulate clearly in comprehensible ways. Sometimes, however, these third parties play an excessively heavy hand, weeding out what seem to them to be odd messages that may be quite important and deferring too much to what is regarded as currently wise and sensible. Correspondingly, the Internet has served as liberating vehicle, making widely available information that previously would never have received much public attention. Nonetheless, this freedom has also facilitated the questionable practices like shaming, rumour mongering, and passing off unsubstantiated information as well-established facts.

Other questionable practices have to do with the ways people use the Internet to obtain information. Some of these practices complement the questionable practices associated with the use of the Internet to send messages. I am referring to the uses of the Internet to pass on rumours and to treat hearsay as fact. Other questionable practices include downloading music, videos, photographs, or information in ways that are either clearly illegal or at least dubious. Many people use the Internet to copy information they in turn treat as if it were their own. Sometimes this assumes the form of overt plagiarism. In other cases it represents instances of careless copying as well as careless failures to identify and attribute sources of information. These problems have become more aggravated with the increased use of the Internet. All of these questionable practices are morally troubling. What is especially challenging with respect to these questionable practices is to figure out effective measures to limit these practices. Efforts to define these wrongs and to meet out severe punishment in hopes of deterring others do not appear to be particularly effective. The individual who are caught and punished typically represent a very small percentage of those involved. Clearly, in order to address these

practices in more effective ways, we need imaginatively to explore a range of familiar and unfamiliar initiatives.

4. Ethical issues related to promising but ambiguous possibilities

The Internet has created and will create countless promising possibilities, the particular moral value of which cannot easily be determined at the outset. By means of the Internet, specific groups and individuals have created hosts of online markets, developed readily accessible entry ports for encyclopaedic knowledge, constructed meeting places for strangers to converse and meet, brought into being gab-sessions for interested parties, and mobilized hundreds of thousands to participate in public demonstrations. These all represent promising possibilities (16). But these uses also raise a number of ethical questions that need to be addressed, such as the following: Given what we know and what we have thus far seen developed, what other kinds of initiatives should we be encouraging? How might we apply or expand some of these practices to address some of the perplexing issues that are inter-connected with our diverse, globalized world that remains unbalanced and at risk? In what ways might existing initiatives have unanticipated troubling side-effects?

Global Perspectives on Business, Internet, and Ethics

As the previous discussion of Internet ethics makes clear, ethical issues associated with the Internet assume diverse forms. Addressing these issues is challenging in a number of ways. In some cases, we only partially understand the full dimensions of the issues themselves. Overall, as we attempt to address these issues, we need to find ways of sorting out which issues are most weighty and important, which issues require more urgent responses, and in relation to which issues are we likely to be in better positions to act effectively. The answers to these questions are likely to be different depending upon our locale and the resources we have available to respond. The most decisive challenge is to develop imaginative and effective responses. Identifying ethical problems is often much easier than developing ways of acting that are likely to have significant impact.

Endnotes

- 1) On February 29, 2008, I delivered a public lecture at St Jerome University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada with the title “Rethinking the bottom line: International Business and Poverty.” I have utilized material from this lecture as I wrote the second section of this essay and small parts of the initial section.
- 2) We could add as well the spheres of influence of the Danish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Dutch, Japanese, and Iranians.

- 3) Paul Collier (2007) *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (Oxford University Press)
- 4) Aside from the recently improved economic circumstances in places like China, India, and Malaysia, there was greater economic growth in the developing world in the period 1950 to 1975 than in the past twenty-five years. See Branko Milanovic (2005) *Worlds Apart: Measuring International and Global Inequality* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press)
- 5) In many settings, to be sure, impoverished people and their leaders occasion or aggravate the poverty they experience. However, most people are poor because their economies are not working well. Poverty is occasioned primarily by weak economies. In both developing and industrialized countries, it is also occasioned by unfair distributions of jobs, income, opportunities, education, access to natural resources, and access to credit. Viewed from the perspective of poor households, many people suffer from poverty because their capacity to generate household income from employment, welfare, credit, and land is blocked, frustrated, or in other ways limited compared to others in their same economy. As I talk about the role of international businesses, I will touch upon how businesses affect these areas. See Frederick Bird (2006) "Perspectives on Global Poverty" *Just Business Practices in a Diverse and Developing World* eds Frederick Bird and Manuel Velasquez (Houndsmills, U.K. : Palgrave-Macmillan), chapter eight.
- 6) Joseph Smucker (2006) "Pursuing Corporate Social Responsibility in Changing Institutional Fields" *Just Business Practices in a Diverse and Developing World* eds Frederick Bird and Manuel Velasquez (Houndsmill, U.K.: Palgrave-Macmillan), chapter 3.
- 7) Although many an advocate has argued that socially responsible firms financially perform better, the case for this position cannot conclusively be demonstrated empirically. (see Simon Zadek, (2004) "The Path to Corporate Responsibility" *Harvard Business Review* (December) (Reprint 80412.; D. Margolis and J. Walsh," Misery Loves Companies: Re-Thinking Social Responsibility by Business" *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 49 pps 268- 305) As I have argued elsewhere, this formulation misconstrues the issues at hand (Bird and Velasquez. Intro to part Two)
- 8) C. Crook (2006) "The Good Company: A Survey of Corporate Social Responsibility" *The Economist* (22 January) pp 1-22.
- 9) Naomi Klein (2000) *No Logo* (London: Flamingo); Raymond Baker (2005) *Capitalism's Achilles Heel: Dirty Money and How to Renew the Free Market System* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons)
- 10) In order to better manage this risk, many of the big brand retailers are now contracting with social auditors to make sure their third world suppliers operate in keeping with minimum codes. See Sylvie Babarik (2006) "Monitoring Labour Conditions of Textile Manufacturing: The Work of COVERCO in Guatemala" *Just Business Practices in a Diverse and Developing World*, eds Frederick Bird and Manuel Velasquez (Houndsmills, U.K.: Palgrave-Macmillan) chapter 7.
- 11) Anderson, Dan R. (2005) *Corporate Survival: The Critical Importance of Sustainability Risk Management*. New York: iUniverse, Inc.
- 12) R. E. Freeman (1984) *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (Boston: Pitman); R.E. Freeman (2004) "The Stakeholder Approach Revisited" *Zeitschrift für Wirtschaft- und Unternehmensethik*, Vol 5 (3, pp 228-41; Frederick Bird (2001) "Good Governance: A Philosophical Discussion of the Responsibilities and Practices of Organizational Governors" *Canadian Journal of Administrative Studies* Vol. 18(4), pp 298-312.

- 13) See Frederick Bird (2004) “Ethical Reflections” *International Businesses and the Challenges of Poverty in the Developing World* eds Frederick Bird and Stewart Herman (Houndmills, U.K.: Palgrave-Macmillan, ch 1) Here is a fuller account of these several types of assets.
- a) There are financial assets – which include investments, credit, insurance, profits, income, wages, and the willingness of its consumers to purchase its products.
 - b) There are productive assets – which include technology, organizational arrangements, energy sources, and relevant physical infrastructures.
 - c) There are human assets – which include the skills and willingness to work effectively by laborers as well as executives.
 - d) There are social assets – which include the networks, trust, and public order (or security) both within firms and within the societies in which they operate.
 - e) There are natural assets – which include raw material firms may process as well as air and water they often take for granted.
- 14) Frederick Bird (2006) “Just Business Practices” *Just Business Practices in a Diverse and Developing World* eds Frederick Bird and Manuel Velasquez (Houndmills, U.K.: Palgrave-Macmillan), chapter 2.
- 15) See Ha-Joon Chang (2007) *Bad Samaritans: Rich Nations, Poor Policies, and the Threat to the Developing World* (London: Random House Business Books) and Raymond Baker (2005) *Capitalism’s Achilles Heel*
- 16) For a useful exploration of these possibilities see Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams (2006) *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York: Penguin Group).

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