

Chapter 13

Corporate Digital Responsibility: Approaches of the Leading IT Companies

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology is reshaping businesses across much of the world, but as companies introduce digital technologies into their business activities, they are facing new sets of responsibilities. While many businesses have enthusiastically embraced the economic benefits of these digital technologies, the social and environmental impacts of these developments have received much less attention. With this in mind, this chapter reviews how the leading information technology companies publicly address their social and environmental responsibilities. The chapter includes an outline of digital technologies and their potential social dimensions and environmental impacts, a brief review of the emerging academic and professional literature to provide some reference and context for the review, details of the method of enquiry and frame of reference adopted by the authors, a review of how the leading information technology companies publicly reported on their social and environmental digital responsibilities, and some general reflections on these social and environmental responsibilities.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technologies continues to disrupt and reshape business models and practices across the world. That said, as companies increasingly introduce digital technologies, so they are facing a new set of responsibilities, which involve “making sure new technologies – and data in particular – are used wisely” (Driesens, 2017, October, para.2). Lobschat et al. (2021) argued that companies employing digital technologies should “be aware that the code they produce or deploy, as well as data they collect

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and process, inherently create an ethical responsibility for them”, and “that organizations must determine how to operate responsibly in the digital age” (p.875). In a similar vein, Andersen (2021, July 29) argued that companies should treat “corporate digital responsibility with the highest strategic priority, helping to create positive futures not only for their businesses but also for the societies they are part of” (para. 1). In looking to chart the scope of corporate digital responsibility, Wade (2020, April 28, para.1) suggested that it “spans four areas – social, economic, technological and environmental – that should be merged under one organisational umbrella” (Figure 1). However, in addressing “Corporate Digital Responsibility and Digital Ethics”, Pauer (2021) argued that “the discourse on the pros and cons of the digital revolution often focuses on technological or economic issues. The sustainability, societal and social dimensions of this development are often more difficult to define and thus usually take a back seat” (para.2). At the same time, Suchacka (2019) suggested that that corporate digital responsibility “presented new challenges for the social sciences” and that it “may be a pioneering area for in-depth empirical studies” (p.5). With these thoughts in mind, this chapter provides an exploratory review of how the leading information technology companies publicly address their social and environmental digital responsibilities. The chapter includes a review of the emerging literature about corporate digital responsibility, details of the method of enquiry and frame of reference adopted by the authors, a review of how the leading information technology companies publicly reported on their social and environmental digital responsibilities, and some general reflections on these responsibilities.

CORPORATE DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND DEFINITIONS: AN EMERGING LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital technologies are electronic systems that generate, process, and store data, and Accenture (2020), the multinational professional services company, suggested, “digital innovation and the rapid adoption of new technologies are changing everything - the way people work, how they live - and what the future will look like” (p.10). More specifically, digital technologies enable immense amounts of data to be compressed and stored in small devices, and to be transmitted at very high speeds. On the commercial side, Elia et al. (2020) claimed “in the last ten years, technology trends such as... cloud computing, Internet of Things, big data, and robotics supported new ways of collaborating, organizing resources, designing products, matching complex demand and offer, and developing new standards and solutions”, and that “such rapid development has profoundly changed the competitive environment and reshaped traditional business strategies, models and processes” (p.1). More socially, digital technologies make it easier to stay in touch with family and friends remotely, to communicate by words, audio, video, for users to be updated on local, social, and sporting news and events, and to use a variety of social media platforms.

In taking a wider perspective on the emergence of the digital technologies, Grigore et al. (2017) suggested that there are underlying features of the digital economy that lead to new areas of responsibility, namely, that digital technology allows for a blurring of boundaries, for example, “between employees and consumers in the case of co-constructed value, between commodities and services in the case of digital consumption, and between content and advertising in the case of promotion by social media” (p.57). Further, Grigore et al. (2017) argued that in all three cases “there is a pressing need to define what constitutes responsible business practice” (p.57).

Agudelo et al. (2019) traced the origins of corporate social responsibility back to Roman times, but it “has been part of business dialogue for many decades” (Sheehy & Farneti, 2021, May 18, para. 14).

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