

Essay - Ethics of Technology - 0FC05

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PREFACE

For this essay assignment, I took a look at the Volkskrant, a daily newspaper in the Netherlands. Next to their daily news articles, their columnist shines a light on topics such as social movements, political decisions or their experiences with technology. The paper is said to have a centrist-leftist view on the world and their readers are often highly educated individuals.

For this essay, I took a look at the Volkskrant's digital homepage on the 24th of September.

I determined if articles had a technological and moral aspect if it described or discussed:

- a (new) technology or its implications,
- questions about the form, shape or situation in which the technology was/are placed,
- actions concerning the activity of promoting, creating or introducing a new technology
- and the moral implications that action might have.

In total, I feel like approximately 10-15% of all articles had technology as their main topic, of these, the majority, say 75-80% did either implicitly or explicitly state a moral or ethical dilemma on the matter. This was often in the form of a discussion to let the reader determine for themselves if they felt the described situation, action or technology is good or bad.

WORD COUNT

202 words in preface

1832 words in essay

2034 words total excluding references

A simple case of corporate bribing or clever cooperation promoting healthcare and renewable energy?

A trick or a good symbiotic relationship? That is the question I asked myself when reading the Volkskrant article on a solar park in Groningen [4]. A company offered 20 million euros to a financially struggling hospital if they would be allowed to build a solar park in the same municipality. Initially, saving a hospital seemed like a generous gift of this company who wanted to build in the neighbourhood. The reactions of the local government to this offer were quite different: “A trick”, “a bribe” and “blackmail” were the initial responses. To better understand the situation, I will argue that the offer offered by the solar park is indeed a form of bribery. I will do this by looking at the offer and the morals of imposing risk and giving compensation and argue how these play a part in bribery in public relations, specifically when promoting the energy transition.

Firstly, a summary of the article. It was published online on the Volkskrant website on the 24th of September 2021 and describes the situation in the municipality of Oldambt in the east of Groningen, where PowerField wants to build a 250-hectare solar park. In return, the company offers to financially help the local hospital, which has been in a difficult situation financially since 2018. PowerField does not ask for influence on the business of the hospital, it wants a support base from the local government in which they want to build the park. The hospital responded very positively to this

idea. However, as they do not own the plot of land, the local government is the one who has to make the decision. Their responses were negative. They felt bribed, blackmailed and deemed the offer is too good to be true.

Before I state why I agree with the members of the local government I want to point out the ethical issue at hand. This case presents an issue not based on the technology, but on the offer the company uses to introduce or push this technology. Their proposal of offering money to the hospital can be seen as a generous gift or a bribe. The difference in perception is the part that has people arguing whether this offer is ethical or not. I will elaborate on the reasons why this action could be seen as a form of bribery using theory on risks, compensation and corporate bribery.

Risks, responsibility and compensation

First of all, the money for the hospital can be seen as a form of compensation or a way to sweeten the deal. Looking at the deal consequentially, it might feel like there are only positive outcomes: green energy, a new, possibly flourishing company, jobs for the people in nearby villages and a hospital saved. However, a key issue in this case, is the lack of discussion of the risks of the construction of the solar park.

Compensations, as Railton [7] states are used to make an otherwise unattractive deal more attractive. A lot of green energy initiatives are hindered by the fact that they have three major disadvantages: they are

expensive, take up a lot of space, and they pose a difficult question between the risks of the technology and the risks of pollution. Railton looks at the latter through a Lockeanistic view, but I want to look at it through the broader sense of contractarianism as a whole.

Let us take a look at the different consequences that a solar park would bring, for the local government members will have to weigh and judge these outcomes to make an informed decision. If we place ourselves in their shoes, we can imagine what the additional 20 million euro check in the deal does to alter our opinion on the offered contract.

An attractive aspect of the solar park is renewable energy, specifically for the local environment. PowerField states that, as set in the 2019 climate accord, half of the production will be used to benefit the local citizens and industry. This could mean that the people will have a say in the energy distribution or will be able to 'adopt' solar panels to generate energy for their own homes, which is cheaper and easier than installing panels themselves.

Additionally, solar panels are less intrusive than other sources of green energy such as windmills or geothermal energy. There are no high towers and blades casting shadows on the homes below, and no vibrations or "horizonvervuiling" (pollution of the horizon), nor does it need a lot of drilling and testing of the ground to get it to work. This is why people who want to invest in green energy often prefer solar panels over other forms of green-energy generation [1].

An unattractive factor is the risk of the solar panels shattering or burning, which can

happen in several ways. In the past year, we have seen a set of examples of this happening. One was the fire in a company in North Holland. The fire caused the solar panels on the roof to burn [3]. The glass of the shattered panels spread along with the ash and was found all across the surrounding meadows and farmland. The small shards are light and brittle and are very dangerous for cows and other life stock. The only option was to clean it all by hand. The landowners had to pay for this clean up themselves, for no insurance company would compensate them. Another two cases [2,6] describe fires on solar fields where a 'transformerhuisje' (transformer house) caught fire due to too much electricity. These fires have the same effect and might also spread harmful smoke and oil.

Next to the risks, a solar field covers the land. In the case of the park of PowerField, 250 hectares, which could also be used to build homes or as farmland. As the Netherlands is currently facing crises in both housing [5] and high amounts of nitrogen in the soil [8] in addition to the high need for renewable energy [1], choosing what to use the land for is difficult.

As we can see, there are arguments for and against the construction of this solar park. The agreement between the parties, with include but are not limited to the above-mentioned considerations, is drastically changed when one party changes the 'original' deal. By offering (additional) money, the substantive responsibility [10] that the parties have or are planning to agree with, change.

The local government has a responsibility for both the land they own and how it is used, and the financially struggling hospital. PowerField offering them a one-time injection of money changes the responsibility of the government towards the hospital, because, if they disagree with the terms, they will choose to continue to let the hospital struggle which is not something the government members want. Especially with only a few hospitals left in the region. However, the deal was never about the hospital, it was about a solar park. I, therefore, argue that this money for the hospital (another responsibility of the government) is a form of compensation for the negative aspects their building plans impose, used to tip the scales in PowerField's favour.

Bribes, gifts and rewards

The company responds to the accusations of bribery by saying that they have not looked for specific cases of hospitals being in financial issues, and simply want to aid the local environment. This response fails, as their offer is the very definition of a bribe as neatly explained by Buchholz [11] in their paper on Bribery and Public Relations.

They describe a bribe as an offer one party does to get something they want or desire in return. The key difference between a bribe and a gift is the strings attached. Using this knowledge and looking at the case, the 20 million for the hospital is not simply a gift, for they do expect some form of support in return.

Now, one might argue that bribing with just positive outcomes is not necessarily bad. To this, I would like to point to the

possibilities of risks as described earlier, as well as state that such a 'bribe' might be a reward. If you reward someone, you have not influenced that person's choice to do anything. That person decided that they want to do something you deem good, and for doing it, they are rewarded. The key difference in a bribe is that they – generally – are used to influence decision making. In the case presented in the article, if PowerFields offer of building the solar park had been accepted, and after that had said, "as a thank you, we want to give your hospital 20 million" the whole situation would have been different. Additionally, a reward can give the incentive to do something good, whereas a bribe is often used to prevent something bad.

Finally, the reasons the government members responded so fiercely to this offer. To understand their reaction better, I think that another aspect Buchholz describes can help us understand this. Buchholz explains that any situation in which two parties are negotiating, or simply communicating, is fertile ground for the manipulation that often results in bribery. As we have come to see, it is a sort of 'transaction' between the two groups, in which a bond of trust is immensely important. Breaking that trust will often result in an antagonistic relationship afterwards. Historically, the people in Groningen have often been dealt a bad hand by large companies offering to share the positive and negative outcomes of a new industry or technology, and then they left the people with more problems than solutions. The gas extraction which caused earthquakes in the region which caused houses to become unlivable [9], the large

windmill parks that are situated there because there is too much resistance against them in more densely populated areas [2], are both examples of this. There is little trust from the side of the local governments, which is why this offer was not received well.

Conclusion

Looking at the works by Scanlon, Railton and Buchholz helped me understand the underlying principles of the interaction described in the Volkskrant article. The introduction of a large renewable energy source in a small town, in return for a sum of money to a hospital initially seemed like

a deal that only had positive outcomes, but after analysing the situation and the interaction between the parties, I would argue that the case here is a complex form of bribery, disguised as goodwill. We cannot judge whether the intentions of PowerField were initially good or bad, but it is clear that there are issues with their offer. In this case, due to firstly the lack of discussions of risks, secondly the involvement in the decisionmaking by involving a whole different responsibility of the municipality in combination with the known trust issues and thirdly the high demand for renewable energy, I would argue this offer to have been morally questionable.

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