

# Understanding McDonald's Among the "World's Most Ethical Companies"

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## Abstract

The animal welfare policies and related public communication initiatives of McDonald's corporation are examined in the context of the organization being named as one of the world's most ethical organizations. The result is a framework for understanding how McDonald's and similar organizations could warrant the status of a most ethical company. Specifically, the narrative strength of the company's articulation of an animal welfare policy and its ongoing promotion as a legitimizing strategy illustrate how McDonald's might address the social and ethical issues it encounters through its operations and how its stakeholding publics are likely to respond. By maintaining narrative strength in communication initiatives and attaining legitimacy, an organization can be perceived as operating within ethical and social norms regardless of policies, perceptions, and reputation that suggest otherwise.

## Keywords

Ethics, Social Responsibility, Animal Welfare, Legitimacy

When decisions are made about which of the world's largest corporate entities can be counted among the "most ethical," competing criteria and perspectives will be in play. In May 2007, McDonald's Corporation and many other organizations that would be equally recognizable were named among the world's most ethical companies (Lentini, 2007). How can McDonald's and its many worldwide operations be considered an ethical enterprise? McDonald's is continually questioned regarding its responsible use of resources. The company draws from a range of resources that includes paper and animal products, farm produce, and the contributions of its many employees as human resources.

The companies were recognized in a magazine published by the Ethisphere Council, which claims to be dedicated to helping organizations grow through ethics, compliance and social responsibility reporting (Join the council, 2007). A web page announcing the honored organizations begins with, "Ethics are absolute" (2007 World's most ethical companies, 2007). Yet, the fairly brief explanation of about two pages of criteria and methodology is anything but absolute. Elsewhere, the magazine editors provide further insight about how ethics figured into the criteria for the recognized companies noting that selected companies needed to show leadership, compliance, and had somehow contributed to the "advancement of industry discourse on social and ethical issues, and positive engagement in the communities in which they operate" (Lentini, 2007, p. 1).

The recognition conferred upon McDonald's and other industry-leading corporations demands a critical perspective. There is danger that social responsibility is coming to be too closely associated with the actions of the largest and mightiest organizations if the current criteria stands as the most influential. Another company on the Ethisphere list, for example, is Starbucks Coffee. Considering that for more than a quarter century there have been coffee companies dedicated to addressing the most formidable challenges to the coffee industry, the choice must be questioned. Other coffee companies have operated since their founding by

supplying only shade-grown, sustainable, and fair-traded coffee and therefore demonstrating ethical behavior and social responsibility that is directly related to the industry in which they operate (De Blasio, 2006). The apparent reasoning Ethisphere applied in choosing Starbucks is an interesting teleological dilemma: No matter that Starbucks' commitment to ethical behavior and social responsibility is not comprehensive; the small percentage of shade-grown and fair trade coffee sold by Starbucks is likely to have greater influence than a much smaller coffee company founded upon and operating exclusively by the same ethical standards and socially responsible actions.

An industry leader, however, ought to be in a position to influence the industry in which it operates regarding ethical and social norms. Ethisphere notes in its criteria that the world's most ethical company needs to "advance" industry discourse. Often, industry leaders do advance industry discourse in an incremental fashion on any number of subjects. The idea of advancing industry discourse in this way, however, does not address instances when, because of ethical concerns, the discourse needs to change direction or be rejected out of hand. The notion, then, of industry leaders being recognized for ethical behaviors as outlined by the Ethisphere criteria is understandable but limiting. A large organization with a proportionately large supply chain should be in a position to influence or impose constraints upon its suppliers, for example. Consider a large supermarket chain that insists all of its dairy suppliers deliver product that is free of rBHT (commonly known as bovine growth hormone) because of the risks it poses to dairy cows and to humans. Likewise, an organization like McDonald's should be in a position to influence the conditions associated with factory farming: the raising and slaughtering of farm animals for food. The examples of the supermarket chain and McDonald's illustrate the degree to which large organization advance discourse within an industry. The supermarket can eliminate the rBHT from the products sells and McDonald's can demand incremental changes related to animal welfare generally. In both in-

stances, however, larger issues about the duties owed to animals remain.

This paper examines the policies and related communication initiatives McDonald's Corporation has put in place regarding animal welfare. The company's animal welfare policy would certainly matter when evaluating "ethical purchasing practices" and how the organization might take greater responsibility for what occurs throughout its supply chain. By demonstrating the narrative strength of McDonald's communication initiatives and their legitimizing function, a richer understanding of how McDonald's and similar organizations can be considered ethical corporate entities will be facilitated.

McDonald's is a large public corporation and receives attention from industry and financial analysts as well as institutional and individual shareholders. Any decisions the company makes concerning policy that is likely to have some impact on operating costs or efficiency is considered to be material for constituent publics. Animal welfare policy within an industry that trades in animals and animal food products would be, by necessity, considered material. The company's presence, however, extends far beyond the geographies of Wall Street and other financial centers.

Locations of McDonald's restaurants reach worldwide and occupy choice real estate in so many neighborhoods that the presence of the restaurants and their associated brand identifiers can be described as being ubiquitous. The McDonald's brand and numerous restaurant locations are considered a phenomenon by writers and publics; and a co-opting of the company name occurs when the proliferation of roadside logos and repetitive patterns of retailing and strip-mall or "big box" architecture is described as McDonaldization. Marquee signs outside McDonald's restaurants proclaim that the company has sold "billions and billions" of hamburgers. The company purchases and sells food in quantities that often serve as examples of something that borders on the proportionately inconceivable. During 2000, McDonald's, for example, purchased one out of every 160 eggs sold in the United States (Kaufman, 2000).

The company has often been at the center of visible debates concerning its operating policy and its position concerning the welfare of animals. McDonald's history of involvement with animal welfare issues represents significant milestones in the history of animal welfare activism. Singer (1998) documented Henry Spira's efforts, which began in 1989, to engage McDonald's in a more forward looking animal welfare policy. At that time, Singer, Spira, and others concerned with the welfare of farm animals were interested in a public policy commitment from McDonald's because Europe was moving far ahead of the United States by establishing and enforcing standards of animal care not yet in place nor even considered in the United States (Singer, 1998). Singer, Spira and others believed, too, that McDonald's was uniquely positioned to establish an animal welfare policy that could serve as a standard for other corporations. The 1989 vision of why animal welfare issues related precisely to McDonald's Corporation and how a publicly communicated animal welfare policy by McDonald's would be likely to influence other organizations appears to have been perspicacious.

In late 2004, McDonald's announced it was considering adopting humane slaughter processes of poultry that were already in place in Europe (McDonald's eyes PETA-friendly option, 2004). Early in 2005, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), Al Sharpton, and others urged a boycott of KFC restaurants, a competitor of McDonald's, because of

KFC's cruelty to farm animals and failure to embrace practices observed by McDonald's suppliers as well as consideration of alternative slaughtering processes (Warner, 2005).

## Animal Welfare and the Restaurant Industry

Animal welfare, the application of humane and ethical norms of responsibility, care, or protection of non-human species, is typically approached across three categories: laboratory animals, animals in the wild, and farm animals. Each category is subject to regulation and each has myriad organizations that seek to exert influence upon existing or future legislation. Commercial interests influence current practices and norms as does the impact from public sentiment when a given practice or perhaps an entire industry is out of step with what is considered to be acceptable behaviors or policy. The Silver Spring Monkey Case, an outcry against the conditions of laboratory animals is often cited as a triggering event for the present day animal rights and animal welfare movements in the United States (Hinson & Hinson, 1994). Animals in the wild are the subject of debates about preservation, ecosystem sanctity, and humane hunting and fishing practices. Trapping animals for their fur occupies a significant chapter in the settlement of the North American continent. Yet today, some states allow the use of leg-hold traps and others do not in consideration of the painful and prolonged death endured by trapped animals. Apparently, then, the welfare of an animal in the wild can change at each state line.

The category of farm animals, however, is perhaps the most complex as commercial or industrial standards are applied to establish a humane life and death of millions of animals. The farm animal category includes standards that apply to the feeding, housing, transportation, and slaughter of animals, which as individual areas of concern present their own animal welfare issues (Scully, 2003). The public communication materials released by McDonald's cover the breadth of these individual areas. The materials include Guiding Principles to establish a high-level framework as well as operational policy details that are subjected to regular monitoring and audit processes (Product responsibility, 2005). The expansive nature of the welfare of farm animals is understandable given the scope of factory farming in its present form. The feeding, housing, transportation, and slaughter of farm animals are all part of the McDonald's supply chain. Additionally, the scale of McDonald's operations requires the use of many factory farm resources. Language on the McDonald's website that describes the company's perspective toward social responsibility reporting and animal welfare as a "systems" view is, therefore, acknowledging the enormities of scope and scale concerning the company's operations, the industries to which it is related, and the social issues in which it is entwined. A systems view of the organization's responsibility suggests that the entire supply chain is taken into account. Yet, the very lack of responsibility throughout the supply chain is what delayed action for a long period.

McDonald's size and public status might slow it down regarding its position on animal welfare, but its size and public status demand it communicates its position responsibly. Policy at odds with social norms could be a serious liability to a public company. In addition to the shareholding public, McDonald's must account for the perceptions of a mass market consumer public. The company's size and its position of industry leadership make McDonald's an easy target should it step outside acceptable social boundaries.

## Factory Farming

Sensitivity to the welfare of farm animals in its broadest conception should address a history of an institutionalized food processing industry and the operations that are common to contemporary factory farms. Although the operations and resulting conditions inside factory farms are likely to remain invisible to everybody except those who live near or work in these facilities, attention is drawn to the food processing industry from several different quarters. The attention the industry receives, often calling out outdated or unsafe practices, can become a threat to legitimacy for any organization tied into its supply chain. In contrast, organizations that communicate a policy or some kind of active role in reversing conditions that are challenged as being unsafe or showing little concern for the welfare of animals, workers, and the general health of consumers, could boost their legitimacy standing with their publics. Issues concerning factory farming and legitimacy, therefore, would first need to be brought to the public's attention before public discussion or the opportunity to revise policy could take place.

The general state of operations and conditions in factory farm facilities are often brought to public attention by organizations like PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and other organizations that communicate actively about animal welfare and animal rights issues (Hinson & Hinson, 1994). PETA uses a variety of communication strategies to focus attention upon an issue that is described as needing immediate attention or a change in operating policy by the food processing and restaurant industries. A company like McDonald's could find itself on the receiving end of advertising campaigns, organized protests, boycotts, and graphic depictions of company and supplier operations.

In addition to organizations like PETA, which are primarily dedicated to campaigning for animal welfare and animal rights, factory farming issues are brought to the public's attention by philosophers, scholars, journalists, and by organizations that participate in the segments of the food industry that rely on factory farmed products. Concern, therefore, about animal welfare issues raised by factory farming practices could be brought to the public's attention by a range of sources. During the past twelve years, for example, there have been popular book titles and media events that have called attention to factory farming through serious exposés and arguments, and by others that use the sensational, the shocking, and the absurd to underscore conditions common to factory farming facilities (Lyman, 2001; Patterson, 2002; Schlosser, 2002; Scully, 2003; Spiegel, 1996).

The level of attention to animal welfare issues and factory farming intensifies as everyday practices or norms associated with the industry are described as new revelations and are compared to the distasteful and horrific. The operations of factory farms present a grim image: For example, factory farms are filthy and germ ridden (Schlosser, 2002). Factory farms destroy the environment and waste resources (Lyman, 2001). The conditions at factory farming facilities mirror slavery and concentration camp operations (Patterson, 2002; Spiegel, 1996). Some of these alarming assertions should not sound all that new considering that Upton Sinclair's, *The Jungle*, first appeared in 1906. A major difference, however, between Sinclair's depictions of the "meat-packing" industry and conditions today, which relate to the food processing industry, is one of scale, and perhaps the sophistication that a more mature and institutionalized industry represents.

## Animal Welfare and Animal Rights

However articulate and extensive McDonald's communication program concerning farm animals is found to be, the policy of the organization is clear about its position being one that recognizes the welfare of animals. The communication materials from McDonald's do not recognize the rights of animals. The distinction is an important one. Although Cohen and Regan (2001) disagree on the issue of animal rights, they share common ground regarding animal welfare. The issue of animal rights is not part of the food processing industry's public dialogue. By necessity to the interests of the industry, rights dialogues are silenced. Considering the nuances of Cohen and Regan's (2001) philosophical yet often practical discussion of animal rights, the subject's inclusion into organizational policy and communication about that policy would be extremely complex.

Cohen and Regan (2001) explain that the animal welfare position is one of duty owed (to animals) and the animal rights position is one of rights (of animals) observed. To explain further, the supporter of animal welfare believes that the humane care of animals is among the duties that humans ought to share in some way. The policies McDonald's articulate address the duties owed to the animals regardless of how animals might connect with the organization's restaurant supply chain. The degree, quality, and type of humane treatment is determined and articulated by the policies and programs of McDonald's and other organizations willing to recognize the concept of animal welfare as a social norm.

## Social Responsibility Reporting

In a recent edition of Bivins' (2005) college text for public relations writing, a chapter title was renamed from the previous edition to include social responsibility reporting. The new chapter title suggests an equal weighting of two important ways for organizations to communicate with their publics: social responsibility reporting and investor relations reporting through annual reports. The suggestion that social responsibility and annual reports are equally important to organizations is in keeping with the many means of communication and specialization that are available to the public relations practitioner who must address a social responsibility issue on behalf of an organization.

McDonald's makes use of all the noted means of social responsibility reporting and enlists the services of specialized news wires and other third-party organizations. Verification from third-parties helps an organization like McDonald's reach across broad publics with consistency. Considering the consistency, frequency, and widespread availability of an organization's public information dedicated to social responsibility, a narrative about the organization's perspective and policy on social responsibility issues is often created.

## Narrative Fidelity and Probability

The McDonald's communication program dedicated to the social responsibility reporting of animal welfare issues is considered to be a narrative because it frames its own history, applies behavioral standards related to moral and ethical decisions, and follows industry and professional presentation conventions. In addition, the ongoing program can be understood and explained using Fisher's (1984) concepts of narrative fidelity and narrative probability. Still, the utility of taking a narrative per-

spective toward an organization's public and promotional communication can be further detailed. Bush (1994) used Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm as a perspective to improve the ethical evaluation of advertising messages. A narrative perspective is useful to understand the degree to which the organization (narrator) establishes shared knowledge, history, culture, biography or character with its publics (Bush, 1994). The history, culture, and character that inform McDonald's animal welfare and other social responsibility issues are shared with its publics to the degree that the messages and narrative are understood and accepted by its publics.

A narrative, for example, could help McDonald's publics understand the moral and ethical justifications for policies and communication related to social responsibility issues and reporting (King, 1992). The perspectives and justifications for decisions concerning policy and social responsibility is a difficult area for applying consistent forms of quantitative measurement. Bush (1994), however, positions a narrative paradigm as a supplement to a quantitative rational approach for understanding the ethical considerations that are likely to influence decisions concerning advertising copy and themes. Applying a narrative paradigm in this way demonstrates the utility of Fisher's (1984) concepts of narrative fidelity and narrative probability.

To attain narrative fidelity, the story must have a degree of verisimilitude (McIntyre, 1994). This condition applies to the present case because how the justifications, policies, and communication of McDonald's correspond to the ethical character of its publics is explored. Narrative probability involves the stories' use of myth, metaphor, and convention, and their relation to given audiences (Bush, 1994; Fisher, 1984). Mythic narratives capture what is important to a culture. Myths make stories about heroism, justice or injustice, hardship, and other conditions their subject.

## Myth and Metaphor

In the present case, subjects in the mythic realm would include the mechanizations of industry and the relation of humans to other species and the environment. Specifically, animal welfare and issue of duties owed to animals while they are placed in the service of humans is mythic in character. The justifications and explanations of decisions related to animal welfare and social responsibility grow in mythic dimension as well. The following narrative development sequence, for example, was identified in the present case: First, an organization's social responsibility narrative is created; then, another narrative is created to relate the organization to an industry to which it is a part; finally, the industry creates a narrative that relates its positions as corresponding to its publics or to society. The McDonald's case illustrates how mythic conceptions are part of social responsibility narratives. Developing a narrative this way illustrates how the organization demonstrates social responsibility within itself through its mission and vision. Then, by positioning itself within its industry, the organization can strive to attain a leadership role in its industry through socially responsible actions. Finally, the activities of both the organization and the industry are shown to be responsible to society at large.

Following Fisher's (1984) definition of narrative probability, the narrative will also make use of metaphor and convention. Metaphor requires a representation of a universally agreed upon meaning or truth. Social responsibility reporting and animal welfare specifically are rich with metaphor use. At the center, narratives are free with terms like "humane slaughter" and "factory farm." Metaphors common to animal welfare narratives can

be created by industry or by popular usage in society. Convention holds a significant place in social responsibility reporting. The subject of the reporting is concerned with the conventions of an organization or industry and the degree to which similar conventions are embraced by corresponding publics. Convention is also found in the form of communication expectations. The ethical and moral reasoning leading to policy decisions needs to be fairly transparent to an organization's publics. The reporting itself appears to be following and defining an operational degree of transparency with more uniform conventions in place that organizations, industry, and communication professionals are expected to observe. Conferences help organizations remain focused on social responsibility issues and public relations agencies and organizations are developing uniform systems of reporting and presentation.

Another example of social responsibility reporting becoming more institutionalized is the CERES-ACCA North American 2004 North American Awards for Sustainability Reporting. During September, 2004, the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) and CERES, a U.S. coalition of environmental and investor groups made the first call for submissions for this award of recognition through a CERES news release. The two organizations seek to recognize innovation and leadership in reporting on sustainability, environmental, and social performance. Accountability to stakeholder publics is made explicit in each organization's "boilerplate" description of itself.

CERES is a coalition of 85 environmental, investor, labor and advocacy groups working together to increase corporate responsibility worldwide. Investor members represent more than \$300 billion in assets. Since its founding in 1989, CERES has persuaded dozens of companies to endorse the CERES Principles, a ten-point code of environmental conduct and publicly report on their performance. More recently, CERES convened and led the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) with the United Nations Environment Program, until it became an independent, international organization in 2002.

ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) is the world's largest international accountancy body with 320,000 members and students in 160 countries. ACCA has promoted transparency in reporting the impact of business activities on sustainable development for over a decade. ACCA is involved in reporting awards in more than 20 countries across the world. ACCA participates in a number of influential organizations, including the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). In recognition of their UK social and environmental issues program, ACCA has been awarded the Queen's Award for Sustainable Development (Call for submissions, 2004, p. 2).

## Attaining Fidelity and Probability

The involvement of organizations like CERES and ACCA help connect the social responsibility reporting and associated narratives to broader audiences. Third-party involvement can also be a source of legitimacy. Audiences judge stories told to them and have a natural tendency to prefer what is perceived as true and just (Cherwitz, 1990). Audiences will then consider and prefer what is true and just regarding narratives of social responsibility and legitimacy. For the narrative to maintain fidelity and probability, the story must demonstrate these qualities in and of itself, and more importantly, in relation to the rest of the world (Rowland, 1987). The concept of legitimacy is also tied to standing among wider audiences or publics; society or the rest of the world, for example.

The McDonald's communication program that addresses an-

imal welfare is positioned to achieve a degree of narrative fidelity and probability from its outset. There is nothing acceptable about animal abuse and this is a perspective that should resonate as true with McDonald's publics. McDonald's communication details policy and procedures that prevent a technically defined type of animal abuse from occurring throughout the vast supply chain managed by the organization. If this information is accepted as being true and matching the moral character of the audience, then a degree of verisimilitude and narrative fidelity is met. Narrative probability is established through the continuous communication about animal welfare policies practiced by McDonald's. The narrative is probable because there is always a forthcoming chapter concerning this organization and the welfare of animals. The ongoing nature of the animal welfare narrative allows Fisher's (1984) concepts of myth, metaphor, and convention to become more visible.

### Core Legitimacy Components

McDonald's actions and the ongoing reporting and social discussion they stimulated encompass the primary forms of legitimacy as outlined by Aldridge and Fiol (1994). In line with Aldridge and Fiol's (1994) framework, the actions include pragmatic, moral, cognitive components. The pragmatic aspects lie in the implementation of policy, the establishment of standards that extend deeply and broadly into McDonald's supply chain, and the enforcement of penalties for non-compliance. The moral aspects connect a duty to lessen animal suffering in ways that are within McDonald's ability to do so and act accordingly. The cognitive, or taken-for-granted, aspects apply to the actions by McDonald's being broadly influential throughout industry segments and among publics concerned about animal welfare. The cognitive form of legitimacy that is generated by McDonald's actions can benefit any perception of legitimacy further by positioning McDonald's to be on the front end of social discussion on the issues (Zyglidopoulos, 2003). McDonald's actions also provide an example of Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) concept of legitimacy in which legitimacy allows analysis of how an organization relates to its environment and provides a linkage between organizational and societal levels of operation.

At first glance, the notion of McDonald's creating a far reaching influence upon the animal welfare discourse throughout an industry and society could be considered to be part of an issue management strategy. Cantor (1989) emphasizes how an issue management strategy seeks to shape public discourse rather than merely participating or reacting to public discourse. Issue management strategy, however, begins with the needs of the organization; consideration of legitimacy with broader political, social, and economic forces (Cralle & Vibbert, 1985). Broader social forces apply in this case. The social forces, all having something to do with the treatment of animals, influence the policy of McDonald's, its suppliers, critics, and even its customers. One organization within the animal welfare sphere of influence, the National Council of Chain Restaurants, receives regular communication from chain restaurant customers seeking assurance that animals are treated humanely (Zwerdling, 2002).

The animal welfare policies of McDonald's represent movement away from logical-empirical entrenchment and toward a normative-affective position. The general movement in this direction by an organization the size of McDonald's and its concentrated influence throughout its related industries and supply chains will contribute to the equilibrium and stability of animal welfare policies and communication. As time passes, more organizations and publics will be exposed to the company's

normative-affective behaviors. Following a similar pattern, the effect of organizations adopting a normative-affective position is believed to create greater economic and environmental stability than logical-empirical approaches (Etzioni, 1988; Swanson, 1992).

### The Benefits of a Leadership Position

McDonald's is able to position its animal welfare policy into a broader policy of sustainability. While animal welfare, social, and environmental issues represent the broad approach McDonald's takes to social responsibility, the company communicates Stead and Stead's (2000) sustainability values of wholeness, diversity, posterity, community and dialogue. Other instrumental values noted by Stead and Stead (2000), however, like smallness and spiritual fulfillment are lacking. Yet, considering the topics receiving attention in social responsibility reports and in the web pages, McDonald's directs policy toward non-human stakeholders. The extended non-human classification of organizational stakeholders includes the natural environment, individual ecosystems, animal and plant species, and the Earth (Freeman, 1994; Orlitzky, 2001; Starik, 1995; Stead & Stead, 1996, 2000). McDonald's claims, then, of industry leadership in its broad approach to animal welfare, social, and environmental issues become valid as they fit with normative conceptions of sustainable operations and expanded stakeholder definitions. Industry leadership also depends on McDonald's ability to remain competitive and profitable. McDonald's explains that the possible conflict between profit and social norms are managed by its ability to balance long-term social responsibility goals with the near-term need to be a competitive performer (Product responsibility, 2005).

McDonald's uses the term "responsible actions" to explain the components of its social-environmental-animal welfare approach to social responsibility and industry leadership. The social category, for example, includes (1) food quality and safety, (2) national sourcing, (3) suppliers and social accountability, (4) promoting antibiotic effectiveness, and (5) changing [potentially unsafe] toy batteries. The environmental category includes (1) protecting rain forests, (2) pursuing a responsible fish supply, (3) biotechnology awareness, and (4) reducing packaging impact. Finally, the animal welfare category includes (1) the Animal Welfare Council and Global Principles, (2) working with experts, and (3) animal welfare audits. The responsible actions communicate a broad sense of responsibility toward natural wildlife habitats, drug efficacy, and child safety. "Responsible actions" is a fitting term to describe McDonald's approach to communicating social responsibility because the actions are reducible to policy, principles, and guidelines that influence behavior and action. In some cases, such as the elimination or curtailment of antibiotics in cattle, and of mercury-button batteries in promotional children's toys, the actions represent a departure from standard industry practices. The actions, then, and their supporting policy details represent social responsibility norms McDonald's chooses to follow and to articulate to its publics.

The McDonald's Agricultural Assurance Program details policy for suppliers that remain in line with the organization's broad approach to sustainable policy and related communication. Seven policy areas for suppliers are intended to help suppliers meet environmental goals and to demonstrate leadership with social issues (Product responsibility, 2005). Echoing the scope of the McDonald's categories of social responsibility and the responsible actions components, policy areas for suppliers include environment, agricultural practices, animal welfare, ani-

mal nutrition, animal medication, transparency, and genetics.

The dialogue and narrative concerning animal welfare that McDonald's encourages and creates, and the likelihood of the communication policies and messages contributing to the success of an actional strategy can be evaluated with Fisher's (1984) concept of narrative probability and fidelity. Bush (1994) and Fisher (1984) note narrative probability involving myth, metaphor, and convention. What is important to a culture is often communicated through mythic elements. Success and power are often the subjects of mythic narratives. McDonald's leadership position as a competitor within its industry and its policies related to important social issues are mythic in their unfolding. McDonald's Animal Welfare Guiding Principles makes the company's position on leadership clear. "McDonald's will lead our industry working with our suppliers and industry experts to advance animal welfare practices and technology" (Product responsibility, 2005).

McDonald's applies metaphor in the use of "responsible actions" to explain the details of its social responsibility perspectives. The use of the term suggests that McDonald's is confident its publics agree upon the meaning and the truth of the company's description of social responsibility and its related policies. Finally, the McDonald's narratives concerning animal welfare focus mostly on the creation of convention. The conventions to the company's operations, the operations of an entire industry, with the values and norms of McDonald's publics and society.

The fidelity of McDonald's animal welfare narratives can be assessed as the ongoing dialogue continues. Criticism or praise by publics focus on whether policy is adequate concerning a given issue, whether policy matches public communication on the topic, and whether a profile of an organization with legitimate policies concerning animal welfare is created. If the standards and audit systems that are claimed to be in place are in effect, operational, are enforced, and produced the results as described, then there would be little reason to question the narrative fidelity of McDonald's animal welfare policy.

## Conclusions

The actions of McDonald's concerning animal welfare contribute to the company's standing among its publics. Animal welfare is a social issue that receives regular attention by concerned groups worldwide and the issue is directly connected to the core business of McDonald's. More importantly, the issue extends throughout the McDonald's supply chain. By communicating its animal welfare policy as it applies to suppliers outside the organization, McDonald's can claim an additional degree of involvement with the issue.

McDonald's web pages and social responsibility reporting invite discourse with a variety of publics: environmental groups, faith-based organizations, industry experts, researchers, and others. The company's guiding principles concerning animal welfare and other social responsibility issues include communication as a necessary component. In actuality, McDonald's details communication of its policy as a part of its social responsibility programs. The communication occurs at points where publics are able to influence policy to some degree. Because of the ongoing communication, McDonald's can also claim to be a socially responsive organization. Taken in aggregate, the communication or public relations materials made available by McDonald's present an incomplete historically representative narrative of McDonald's involvement with animal welfare. At no point, does the narrative indicate a crisis situation to which the organization must respond. The narrative suggests that McDonald's

has always been on the right course concerning animal welfare. Criticism of the organization positions and policies concerning animal welfare are found to originate from other sources. Financial and business analysts and the general media often report on McDonald's standing regarding social issues and its leadership position in the industry. Unfortunately, there is little questioning of current policies or even of past policies.

Animal welfare links questions concerning legitimacy to McDonald's for several reasons. Publics are interested in how McDonald's policies are aligned with social norms and industry standards. As McDonald's maintains a position of industry leadership, there is an assumption by various publics that its responsibility for legitimate policy concerning animal welfare should be "first" and "best." McDonald's response and leadership on the issue, then, become instrumental to its standing of legitimacy among its publics. The company's policies and communication regarding animal welfare provide context to examine organizational legitimacy in the absence of a crisis and Boyd's (2000) concept of actional legitimacy.

This research raises additional questions concerning how social responsibility and ethical behavior is communicated by organizations and how the communication is perceived by publics. Despite the very useful perspective provided by the concept of legitimacy and the tests of narrative fidelity and probability, there is difficulty in ascertaining motive and the extent of an organization's ethical behaviors and socially responsible policies. As in the case of McDonald's, historical events and philosophical positions common to the organization's publics mitigate what some sources describe as ethical behavior. McDonald's animal welfare policies and communication offer no explanation of past transgressions and their consequences. The narrative about the company's commitment to animal welfare neglects to mention the role of PETA and of other publics that have long voiced concern about issues to which the company chose not to attend.

When McDonald's promotes its position on animal welfare and other social issues an upbeat positive account is perhaps all that should be expected. Yet, because McDonald's enjoys status as one of the world's most ethical companies and part of the criteria for earning that status includes advancing discourse that pertains to the industry, the company's narrative ought to be more representative. Similarly, readers of the Ethisphere list of the world's most ethical companies will not encounter any discourse concerning the ethical issues that were likely to have a role in earning McDonald's a place on the list. Nor will readers learn about the long (or short) history each of the other most ethical companies had regarding the ethical and social issues responsible for calling attention to their operations. Considering that "advancing discourse" within an industry was among the criteria for making in onto the list, the lack of an open exchange of ideas through dialogue is troublesome. Ethisphere might not have had the resources to create the type of discourse it encourages. Perhaps organizations much smaller than McDonald's do not have the resources to advance discourse in the same grand scale of an industry leader as well.

Questions about how organizations seek to express their commitment to ethical behavior and social responsibility deserve attention. The concepts of legitimacy and narrative fidelity and probability should not be so easily applied in the service of a convenient conception of ethical and socially responsible behavior—one that could be used to help frame the perception of being among the world's most ethical companies, most of whom happen to be large corporations and leaders in their respective industries. The effects, however, of a large corporation's ethical

behavior and position toward social responsibility, or lack of it, can have serious consequences for all its publics. If the concepts of legitimacy and narrative fidelity and probability can help us to understand corporate actions and communication, the necessary and expected discourses addressing ethical and responsible behaviors will advance.

### Limitations for This Study

The case study approach used in this research is an instrumental strategy to gain greater insight into an issue or to refine theoretical understanding. The bounded context of the case is unique

to the degree that same case study approach to the same organization repeated a year later might yield different results. Although the difficulty to produce exact methodological replication is sometimes viewed as a limitation, the approach lends itself to theoretical replication (Yin, 2003). In this research, a greater understanding of how an organization influences the perception of its ethical behaviors with legitimizing strategies was sought. Additional case studies on the social and ethical issues themselves and their relation to a more broadly conceived form of organizational legitimacy are warranted for a greater understanding of how social issues influence ethical behaviors of organizations and vice versa.

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