

**THE TYRANNY OF TRANSPARENT
ACCOUNTING: CORPORATE FACE AND
LEVINASIAN ETHICS AS A POLITICAL
CRITIQUE OF BUSINESS PRACTICE**

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John Farnsworth and Malcolm Lewis

Introduction

We begin with the key idea, following Callon (2004) that data is a form of politics or political action. This we will argue enables us to see technologies as well as actors in organisations as involved in creating political activity. Our interest is in the way Levinas's ethics allows us to articulate what otherwise remains silent: this opens enquiry into the engagement with the Other's ineradicable alterity, to questions of justice and the third, and to the way that accounting practice persistently reduces the Other to the Same.

To move from the politics of data to the ethics of accounting and business practice we draw together elements of actor network theory with Levinas's thinking. We do this to show how data can speak its politics: in speaking, it revives the possibility of the uncontainable Saying over the fixed codification of the Said. We develop this argument by looking at how the seemingly transparent activities of accounting and audit practice as forms of codification conceal a form of domination that silences ethical engagement with the Other and the third. We link such practices to the larger economic system of financialisation in which contemporary accounting practice is embedded. Lastly, we take the case of Telecom New Zealand, a medium-sized international IT company, to point to the way it routinely deploys data, in forms such as the annual report, to obscure the politics in which it is engaged.

Levinasian ethics and actor network theory

In his extended review of Andrew Barry's (2001) *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society* Callon (2004), uses Deleuze's notion of the *diagram*¹ to develop a concept of *agencement socio-technique* (sociotechnical arrangements). His argument (Callon 2004: 121) is that sociotechnical *agencement* describes a 'combination of human

¹ Deleuze explains 'the diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality.' (Deleuze, G, 2003)

beings and technical devices caught in a dynamic configuration (the *agencement* acts).’ Thus, we have the composite and distributed character of all action and the impossibility of definitively separating humans from technologies. *Agencements* are primary and determine the relevance and significance of major divisions such as those between humans and non-humans or between ‘nature and culture’ (122). For Callon, the concept of *diagram* makes it possible to stress the variety of different configurations to which *agencement* gives rise.

It is the demand for citizens to be active in a democracy rather than passive, linked to the emergence and progressive spread of a new form of socio-technical *agencement* that makes and shapes this form of citizenship. This is associated with the appearance of a new diagram: the interactive diagram. Barry (2001) considers that the interactive science museum provides the best example of this. Interactivity incites the visitor to participate rather than observe. This transforms subjects into authors of their own actions and initiatives and does not constitute them as subjects. The subject is learning something other than science; the subject is learning to behave as an active ‘technological citizen’. (Callon, 2004: 126) summarises thus,

This learning does not consist of absorbing discourses and ideologies exhorting him (sic) to be active: it ensues from successful engagement in interactive *agencement*: ‘Politics does not circulate just through the flow of ideologies or rationalities of government, but through diagrams, instruments and practices’ (quote from Barry 2001:151).

And it is exactly here that such instruments become engaged in the passage from politics to ethics. In the movement towards the democratic interaction proposed by actor network (Latour, 2005b); I am bound in profound ethical relation not merely to the Other as person, artefact and technology but to all others – to *le tiers* and so to questions of justice. I am assembled in and through emergent networks of connection, as actor network identifies them, to the community. A community in this form is a dynamic assemblage constituted as a public realm of interaction sustained by actors, objects and technologies (Latour, 2003): an ‘object-oriented democracy’ (Latour, 2005a). This is also a community that Critchley (1999: 226) describes as: ‘*the coincidence of coincidence and non-*

coincidence, what Levinas calls in a rather uncomplicated manner, ‘human fraternity’ (*la fraternité humaine*).’ Politics and ethics are, potentially at least, joined.

It is a short step from here to distinguish the disjunction of politics and ethics. We argue that audit and accounting as forms of data management, are rational practices that also function as a form of politics where, taking a Levinasian view ‘everything is political’. Levinas considers that the primacy of politics is the primacy of the synoptic, panoramic vision of society (Critchley, 1999: 221). However, such a panoramic vision for the philosopher and the political theorist creates the greatest danger because it loses sight of ethical difference - which means my particular ethical relation to and obligation towards the Other. Moreover, Levinas is critical of liberal politics because he opposes the domination of politics enacted in the totalising concept of society, where spontaneity, freedom and autonomy dominate the discourse. The Levinasian critique then, is a critique of the belief that only political *rationality* can answer political questions (cf Critchley, 1999: 222).

Accounting and Audit

The implication of Levinas’ view is that the dominance of liberal rationality, the domination of one particular form of order over another form, ‘creates a life of its own’ (Strathern, 1997: 305). Accountancy and audit become a form of politics where the sight of ethical difference is lost. Within the business context, the constant reiteration of the same through the requirements of accounting always to *measure* is a form of politics (in the Levinasian sense) because accounting is always totalising by reducing the Other to the Same. It does so because inevitably accounting requires standardisation. To standardise is to establish criteria that enable us to decide as to how two situations, two events are different or similar. These classifications relate to politics, ethics and the economy (Callon, 2004: 130). Moreover, the activity of audit intrinsic to accounting is a method of ordering; such ordering of things and relations is one that, as Strathern (1997: 305) comments, creates ‘a life of its own’.

A synoptic, panoramic rational vision of society imposes one form of ordering over another that entails *surveillance* where visibility for the conduit for rational knowledge elides with visibility as an instrument for control (eg Introna and Wood 2004). What is at issue here is the contemporary social practices of audit, quality assurance and accountability and the way in which one kind of reality is knowingly eclipsed. In the corporate business sector (as elsewhere) accountants and auditors test the performance of financial organisations and ‘...what is being tested is how amenable to auditing [organisational] activities are or how performance matches up to performance indicators’ (Strathern, 2000: 309). Yet as Strathern points out, people both deploy and are sceptical about deploying visibility as a conduit for knowledge. Whilst they accede to the idea of accountability, they regard performance indicators as a highly constructed and artificial means of measuring real output. Strathern argues that: ‘[a]s the term accountability implies, people want to know how to trust one another, to make their trust visible, while (knowing that) the very desire to do so points to the absence of trust’ (Strathern, 2000: 310). It is in such moments that the tyranny of transparency imposes itself, where the destruction of human fraternity may take place and where the potential for inequality and domination emerges.

Paradoxically, the visibility that Levinas emphasises is exactly the opposite and involves encounter. As Introna (2003:2) puts it: ‘In being exposed to the other *as Other* the ego becomes unsettled, shaken, fundamentally and irrevocably interrupted. In facing the *Other* we live in an ongoing fear for the life of the *Other*.’ The face entreats me through its expression (Levinas, 1996: 65). Yet as Introna (2003: 4) comments, ‘in its expression the face does not become present to me, rather the face is present in its refusal to be contained.’

But simultaneously, we are not simply faced with the Other. As Levinas (1969/1961: 213) observes, ‘The third party looks at me in the eyes of the other.’ Nor is merely visibility is involved, but presence too; as Introna (2003: 4) puts it: ‘It is exactly this simultaneous presence of the Other and all other Others that gives birth to the question of justice...It is this simultaneous knot of that face and the third, the singular and the

category, ethics and politics that is the most powerful of Levinas' thought. It is also impossible.' Such moral impossibility arises out of the force of responsibility to both the Other and the third but also, following Derrida (1990), out of the aporias of suspension, undecidability and urgency.

Such dynamic ethical dilemmas are a very long way from either the ordering, rational world of accounting or the transparent surveillance involved in audit. Yet these mark precisely the moment of transition between the encounter of the Saying and the stabilization of the Said.

Accounting and Financialization

Accounting always involves epistemology – a way of representing the world - largely through figures and their accompanying narratives (Shearer, 2002 Arrington and Schweiker, 1992). Such representations persistently erase the presence of the Other and the others strangeness / alterity by rendering it routine.

Financialisation is the major form of articulation of accounting/epistemology in the business world at large (Froud and Haslam et al, (1999); Froud, and Johal, et al, (2004)) with its heavy emphasis on maximising and celebrating the rise in shareholder value. Krippner (2005: 199) sees it as a recurrent but definable phase in the evolution of capitalist economies. A key goal of financialisation is 'to keep the share price improving' (Newberry and Robb 2005: 4), often by coupling this to a rhetoric of shareholder value and to a success narrative that attempts to enrol state agencies, the media and interest groups as it unfolds. The consequence is a constant pressure to misreport earnings and obfuscate accounts, as for example, the relatively recent dotcom bubble illustrated. How then does politics come to play in particular organisations? We take as a case illustration the financial arrangements of Telecom New Zealand.

To understand Telecom New Zealand's corporate practices we first place these briefly, in two different contexts, thereby locating Levinas' ethics more effectively in relation to complex corporate activity. Both contexts in effect, are concerned with the precise ways

that accounting symbolises business activity through the use of figures as means of determining value. Both are also involved with the way modern accounting practices are represented, as seen in the recent complex debates over rules-based to principles-based accounting standards (Shortridge and Myring, 2004).

The first context is to do with financialization and accounting practice. The practice of accounting can be said to construct detailed representations of corporate practice through spreadsheets, annual reports, financial instruments and other complex mechanisms. These necessarily rework the world they present in the process of depicting it (Schweiker, 1993). With a shift in such representations under accounting standards or through financialisation, the accounts on offer also shift. Shearer (2002: 545) puts such accounting practice in terms of storying: 'We are the stories we tell; what we would be if we told different stories is precisely the point'. This has a decisive impact on the related worlds – the Other - with which accounting and business engage. As Quattrone (2005: 2) comments, it involves 'a shift from a view of accounting theories as a form of epistemological representation to a new form of accounting which needs to reflect on the effects that accounting has or may have on the Other.'

The second context has to do with Telecom's relationship to financialization. The growth of financialization emphasises the move towards 'a pattern of accumulation in which profits accrue primarily through financial activity rather than through trade and commodity production' (Krippner, 2005: 174). As Tainio (2003: 62) describes it, financialisation consists principally 'of restructuring, acquisitions and divestments made primarily to create shareholder value.' The same pressures and representational issues with financialization surround Telecom New Zealand and its local environment (Lewis and Farnsworth, 2005). This explains the anxieties expressed, for example, by New Zealand accountants and businesses in the wake of the Enron scandal (Diplock, 2002; ICANZ 2002). In effect, the very means of representation mobilised through accounting, and through its accompanying ethical legitimacy, was called into question. It is in this context that Levinas offers an alternative epistemology and a very different ethics.

Telecom New Zealand

Telecom, itself, was created from the New Zealand Post Office as part of a massive state privatization campaign in the late 1980s. It has since had a complex history, being bought by a US consortium of Ameritech and Bell Atlantic in 1990, and then being sold on by them from 1998 onwards. The same strategies that emerged around financialization in the US also applied to Telecom in the New Zealand context. For example, it has been at risk of involvement in the practice of *pumping and dumping* – the practice of *pumping* up share prices then *dumping* them should a financial crisis occur, on an unsuspecting public (Newberry and Robb 2005).

In a thorough-going analysis, Newberry and Robb have also listed a variety of other, similar accounting practices which illustrate the sophisticated devices and book-keeping arrangements Telecom has engaged in (Newberry 2004a; 2004b; Newberry and Robb, 2005). These include the differing treatment of audited and unaudited earnings; the valuation of intellectual property; the way dividend policies have been sequentially recalculated over time; share repurchase used to bolster refinancing programmes, and other complex accounting arrangements. The net result, as Newberry and Robb (2005: 20) comment, is that ‘Telecom seemed happy to take credit for its rising share price prior to 2000, but when the telecoms bubble burst in 2000, Telecom attempted to distance itself from responsibility for its falling share price’.

We now turn to look at how we might engage Levinasian ethics with profit-driven corporate activity such as Telecom New Zealand’s. We look at how in turn this both silences and reduces the Other and the third who appears in the Other’s face. We take up two aspects of Telecom’s practice:

- Telecom as corporate ‘face’ that silences the Other
- Telecom’s use of sophisticated accounting and audit practice

Telecom and Face

Our larger point with ‘face’ is the way that Telecom *assembles* actors, technologies and networks in order not to encounter with but reduce the Other and the third. At one and the same moment, it appears to honour and articulate human fraternity as it also reduces and defers encounter. How, in practice does this take place? We take 3 samples from Telecom’s (2005) last annual report as illustration.

Firstly, consider the faces and the notes (Figures 1 and 2). On the one hand the faces stand as representations codified and presented in exactly the way argued by Introna (2003: 9) with respect to the screen – as ‘subsumed categories (rules, structures and layouts)’ memories. – which are simultaneously presented and erased: codified and conditioned.’ This provokes two opposed possibilities, one that opens out to the potential negation of the Other; the second that such a defacement opens up the question of justice precisely through this ‘defacement’.

Figure 1



In Figure 1, the individual and his note stand in a relation of tension to us, the viewer or reader. The image both invites and refuses participation: it promises an engagement that links our individual and communal lifeworlds to a confraternity through technology. It offers the *assemblage* of actors and technologies in the creation and storage of memory. It is human in its invitation. Yet, simultaneously its refusal and its ethical foreclosure to us is subtly obscured: the image appears as part of a glossy corporate brochure designed

to woo investors, government agencies and regulators; it is part of Telecom's strategy to position itself as a monopoly provider of regional IT services; and part of its corporate work to hide its inconsistencies and lapses from scrutiny and comment (Newberry and Robb, 2004). It is simultaneously transparent and hidden in its pursuit of technological and market dominance – and so too, in the shaping of the human enshrined in access to our communal life memories. Here in effect, is the display of the tyranny of transparent accounting. Here too, is the revelation of the politics of data, in this case, through the image.

Yet, at one and the same time, as it deflects my disturbing encounter with the Other, so that it becomes a representation open simply to my consumption, this very negation of the Other's surplus opens up the possibility of justice. Why? Because as Introna (2003: 11) argues

Levinas argues that de-facing is a condition necessary for justice to prevail in society. Politics requires the 'third' perspective. It seems that in some way the interface points me towards the question of justice. There is a community of thirds that has an equal claim on me. In the anonymity of the interface I have to weigh, calculate and decide.

So, at the very moment that I regard the image I can simultaneously engage with all those others, *le tiers*, whose life memories for instance, are implicated in this image. And then I can consider how this corporation, with whose images I am confronted, imposes its tyranny of transparency through the politics of data.

Similar ambiguities surround the images (Figure 2) of ordinary Telecom staff. To echo Introna (2004: 10): 'For the manager the productivity figures become re-presentations of those who work 'hard' and those who are 'lazy'. For the bank manager the account details become representations of those who 'manage the money well' and those who do not.' Here are images not of figures but those who produce them – those who 'manage the money well' and those who work hard. Yet, at the moment of engagement with these representations we are simultaneously, thrown into a moment of comparison – not just with the Other here but all the other others who are implied. As Levinas (1996) puts it,

‘Comparison is superimposed onto my relation with the unique and the incomparable, and, in view of equity and equality, a weighing, a thinking, a calculation, the comparison of incomparables’

Figure 2

Our People



These are simply images from a series in this one annual report. On the one hand, the series (Figure 3) – about notes and people – tells a story about Telecom and its people, ‘our people’ – in effect, a kind of account that over and again through an apparent transparency hides the third. And which subsumes them to a theme that forecloses the disturbance of encounter with the Other. Cohen (2000: 34) writes: ‘What constitutes the very humanity of the human, and hence the humanity of human intelligence, is the significance Levinas names “proximity”: ethical relationship with the other, “the relationship with the other, who cannot be resolved into ‘images’ or be exposed in a theme”.’

Figure 3



Again and again there is a constant repetition of these ‘stories’ and these representations of the good corporate firm that consistently silences while seemingly presenting an openness. Yet, once again, such a series while it offers itself as a theme, also invites the possibility of the justice that appears concealed. Which response do I take up? In the fullness of my awareness I am faced with the impossible moment of undecidability.

Such images and their transparent appeal are all juxtaposed within the pages of the same annual report. This is a report incidentally, which is little different to those of other years. It is of course, little different to those of other companies; indeed auditing standards, while they may differ somewhat from economy to economy, demand just such a codified presentation. So it is that the images and text act as codified statements that consistently and reliably work to reduce the Other to the Same with no sense of the alterity of the Other available within their pages. The language and the presentation both reinforce this. Take, for instance, the following statement:

The New Zealand sharemarket has enjoyed a stellar year with the NZSX 50 gross index closing 20.4% higher, benefiting from a strong macroenvironment with high commodity prices offsetting the strength of the New Zealand dollar, which has been impacted by New Zealand’s high real interest rates.’

Such a bland, disembodied language disengages the reader from any encounter with the Other. However, as we suggest it simultaneously opens up the possibility of calculation and comparison if we are alive to this, so that the politics of data deployed by Telecom may return us to the question of justice: to those who are excluded or silenced by this form of totalising politics.

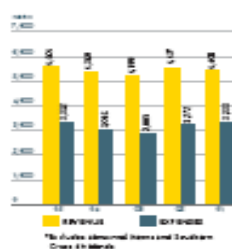
Images and text such as this are also combined in any annual report with statistics, spreadsheets, accounting packages: all the forms of representation identified earlier with typical accounting and audit procedures. Telecom’s are no different (Figure 4).

Figure 4

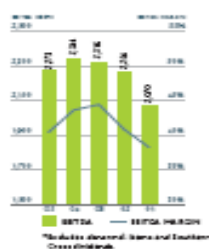
Financial Review

Key Performance

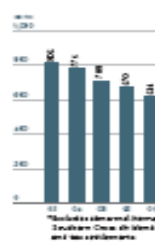
Revenues & Expenses*



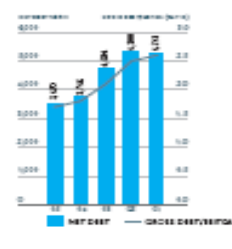
EBITDA & EBITDA Margin*



Adjusted Net Earnings*



Net Debt & Gross Debt/EBITDA



Five Year Review

AS AT AND FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE

	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001
Financial Performance (all NZ \$m)					
Operating revenues (excluding abnormal items and Southern Cross dividends)	5,605	5,360	5,199	5,537	5,408
EBITDA* (excluding abnormal items and Southern Cross dividends)	2,273	2,344	2,316	2,265	2,070
Abnormal items (net, before tax)	95	(93)	—	(862)	(268)
Taxation	(392)	(337)	(397)	(365)	(283)
Net earnings/(loss)	916	754	709	(388)	643
Dividends declared ²	946	521	378	374	362
Financial Position					
Total assets (NZ \$m)	7,421	7,500	7,755	8,245	8,072
Return on assets ³	21.3%	20.9%	19.3%	17.4%	19.9%
Gearing ⁴	59.1%	63.0%	72.7%	80.0%	72.4%
Other Financial Data					
Interest cover ⁵	5.1	4.5	3.8	3.4	3.7
Debt rating ⁶	A2/A	A2/A	A2/A	A2/A	A1/A+
Cash flow from operating activities (NZ \$m)	1,703	1,681	1,566	1,351	1,758
Capital expenditure (NZ \$m)	703	608	600	778	1,525
Earnings/(loss) per share (cents)	47.0	39.2	37.6	(10.1)	35.4
Dividends per share ⁷ (cents)	48.5	27.0	20.0	20.0	20.0

1. Earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation. 2. Including supplementary dividends. 3. Normalised earnings before interest and tax divided by average total assets (net of cash and short-term investments). 4. Net debt divided by net debt plus equity. 5. Normalised earnings before interest and tax divided by net interest expense (before interest capitalised). 6. Long-term foreign currency ratings from Moody's Investors Service/Standard and Poor's.

Compare this example with Callon and Barry's analysis of the diagram and the sociotechnical *agencement*. Here we can see in this typical audited annual report how it is that the exact assemblage of actors and technologies work as PDF files, web pages, spreadsheets, word processing and image packages, and how these can be reformatted and variously reworked through different means of distribution. This report, for instance, is available as a brochure and, on the internet as a PDF file. These are the actors, objects, technologies and networks assembled to disseminate and represent a particular image of the firm in a way which erases any encounter with the Other. Here in effect, is the political organised and distributed through data, the point that Callon and Barry make in different contexts. The corporate face, assembled as it is, has erased the radical alterity of the Other and the larger human fraternity with which it is engaged. Yet, once again, this

immense defacement, most efficiently produced through formidable, specialised display of figuration – the epistemology of accounting – simultaneously opens up the potential comparison of the incomparable; still offers the possibility of justice at the moment the silencing and erasure of the Other’s disturbing plenitude is erased. This is the manifestation, as Critchley (1999) describes it of the coincidence of coincidence and non-coincidence. It also reveals, as we’ve suggested, the tyranny of accounting at work: where the transparency of the annual report hides and effaces any possible encounter with the Other. But the politics of data, managed through the complex assemblages mobilised by Telecom nonetheless call to those silent and invisible others demanded by an ethics of responsibility. As Levinas insists, it is the movement from a totalising politics to ethics which offers the prospect of a fuller engagement with the human fraternity beyond the corporate face and figuration.

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