Transcript of ‘Corporate Political Activism’

Season 3, Episode 29, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Today we find out what motivates companies to publicly engage in political activism and what impact it can have.

[Theme music]

Paul: Do you have a favourite company, Jan?

Jan: Uh, favourite company…?

Paul: …I don't mean *my* company, [Jan laughs] because obviously my company ranks above everyone else's…

Jan: …what can I say…

Paul: …I'm meaning in terms of corporations and businesses.

Jan: Yes. Um, but probably a set of them and probably for, I like them for different reasons.

Paul: Can I just check you're not about to say just for political purposes, Pentland Brands, because they pay your wages?

Jan: [laughs] Uh, well I think they're a much-admired company in my view.

Um, but, but we might leave that aside, [Paul laughs] 'cause otherwise we'll be, definitely be in trouble with everyone. But yeah, there's some places that I would definitely go to, um, if I had the chance, yeah.

Paul: When you choose your favourite company, and frankly, I think it's bizarre you have one, I thought the answer would've been no, [Jan laughs] do you take into account their stances on any kind of socio-political issues?

Jan: Some of them. So, um, uh, I don't in general buy a lot of, uh, stuff from Lush, but when I do, I know that, 'cause they, they quite often have stances that, that sort of accord with my values. And so I quite like, um, Lush as, as one example.

Paul: Lush are, I'm gonna describe them as like a cosmetics and body care sort of…

Jan: …yeah, sort of bath bombs, and those sort of…

Paul: …bath bombs…

Jan: …and those sorts of things.

Paul: Don't have much use for them in my house, [Jan laughs] bath bombs, I have to say…

Jan: Yeah, well no, their, their solid conditioner, I really like. Am I allowed to say that? But yeah, I do.

Paul: Yes. No, but, so yeah, so you, when it comes to Lush, you understand they have some kind of stance on issues and you buy products, some specific products, then.

Jan: Indeed and, and I used to feel like that about the Body Shop, 'cause I'm old enough to remember when the body shop sort of first came, uh, to the UK. And then over time it was, you know, um, you know, Anita Roddick passed on, the place was sold, there was all sorts of different changes. And so now I wouldn't proactively go there for a support, a political sort of ethos of a, of a company, but I may have done that in the past.

So I think it's, maybe, it's also maybe quite a volatile sort of thing, you know, you can use it or lose it, kind of idea.

Paul: Mm-hmm. Yeah, no, it's interesting when I come to think about businesses, shops, say, that you can go in and shop that have political stances, I think more about, possibly more the obvious ones.

The charity shops, the likes of Oxfam, the likes of Save the Children, the likes of, I'll say the British Heart Foundation, although I don't think they have any, uh, political views apart from, you know, let's stop people dying from heart disease. [Jan chuckles]

Um, but you know, it is shops out there. They, they are designed around an, a particular issue. They are the retail branch of an organisation with a political stance…

Jan: …what about, what about the converse? I mean, um, do you regret buying your Tesla?

Paul: [pause] I don't have a Tesla, [Jan laughs]I, I would never have bought one in the first place. Because before we went politically, you know, to a stance, I totally don't agree with, the man I just didn't like anyway.

So I would never have bought, uh, a Tesla because of the man who owns the company.

Jan: Yeah. But I suppose it shows it as a two-sided thing. That you might lean towards, uh, somebody, but you also might lean away from companies with regard to their, either their owners, or their, they themselves political stance.

Paul: Yeah. Uh, that's a, a strange instance where you've almost got an owner whose political standpoint would seem in some ways to be geometrically opposed to what the company itself stands for…

Jan: …yeah, it's fascinating…

Paul: …yeah, it's, it's, just odd, it's odd. Why are we talking about this?

Jan: I have no idea.

Paul: [laughs] We were just on a trip to the shops [Jan laughs] and somehow got caught up in what businesses, no. We're talking about this because today we're gonna be talking about corporate political activism, and that is where firms take a public stance on contentious sociopolitical issues.

And we're gonna be talking about it with someone who's a PhD researcher in the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology here at Lancaster University Management School.

And that is Lewis Nicholas. Welcome Lewis.

Lewis: Thank you very much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Paul: Do you have a favourite shop?

Lewis: Do I have a favourite shop? Oh. Um, in Lancaster there's a shop called, uh, Analog stuff. And they sell very nice stationary, which, you know, as a PhD

student. I like having nice pencils, nice highlighters, nice notebooks, things like this. Um…

Paul: …I assumed AI just did all of his work for him in this current day and age…

Lewis: [sarcastically] … absolutely…

Paul: …but obviously you'll deny that, but yeah. Oh no, you *won't* deny that, you'll admit it, and I'll pass that on to your examination committee when it comes the time.

Do they have any political stances that you are aware of? Analog in Lancaster?

Lewis: I don't, not that I am, I'm aware of, no. But you know, they're a small, small, independent business. Um, so, you know, it's perhaps something we'd associate more with, with larger, larger corporations.

Paul: Yeah. Which is something we're gonna be coming onto, of course.

Jan: It is indeed, it is indeed.

Paul: Yes. Yeah. First of all though, before we get too deep into corporate political activism, can you tell us a bit about yourself, your background, what you were doing before you came to study here, and why you wanted to study for a PhD in this area?

Lewis: So, yeah, as you said, I'm a PhD student here at Lancaster, but I actually first came to Lancaster in 2016, so nearly 10 years ago to study for my, uh, undergraduate degree.

Um, initially, uh, I was on a Management programme and then I switched to a joint honours Management and Politics programme. And as an observer of business and politics, the time when I started university, it was a very, uh, politically volatile time, a time of increasing political polarisation.

We had the, uh, we'd had the Brexit referendum in the UK. In the US you had, uh, the election of Trump. Over in France you had the presidential election with, Macron and uh, Marine La Pen. And there was a bit of an explosion of activism and protest around some of these events. Protests around, uh, women's rights issues, immigration issues, uh, LGBT+ issues.

Um, and one of the most fascinating things I think about these protest movements was the involvement of business in them. That, you know, historically business has often been the target of protestors. It's been criticised

as part of the establishment, as you know, this, big businesses at least, as a kind of oppressive entity.

And we saw this inversion where businesses were on these marches, you know, they were producing placards. They were saying, yeah, we're on the side of, uh, these protestors. And that just really fascinated me. Um, and I wrote my undergrad dissertation on it. I then wrote my Master's dissertation on it, and, and now my PhD.

So barring a couple of years that I've spent out working in non-academic roles, it's really been a, yeah, a continuation of a, a journey I've been on for a few years now.

Jan: He's obsessed. [laughs]

Lewis: [laughing] Pretty much, yeah. Monomaniacal. [laughs]

Paul: He's also one of these people who just get stuck in Lancaster and they can't escape…

Jan: …a lot, a lot worse could happen to, you than being stuck in Lancaster. [everyone laughs]

Paul: There are many, many people who, yeah, end up here for far longer than they may have originally envisaged when they first arrived.

Jan: So to get us going, could you define corporate political activism? Because I'm sure that some of the things that Paul and I chatted about at the beginning was probably not.

And so there, there'll be a very, there'll be domains and sort of guardrails around what this is all about.

Paul: I'd like to think that the issue of stationary shops is a very much deeply entrenched corporate political activism issue…

Jan: …aaah, but it wasn't. But your…

Paul: …oh, we didn't bring that up, did we? So that's fine…

Lewis: …that's a future research direction for me, uh, I think, Paul. [Jan laughs]

Um, so yeah, corporate political activism, as you said, describes when private businesses take a stance on a contentious, a public stance on a contentious sociopolitical issue.

So we are referring to private companies here. So charities, although, you know, they might engage in activism, they wouldn't typically be included in this definition 'cause they're not profit-making companies.

So, by taking a public stance, this can be a combination of words and actions. Ordinarily it is. So it may be a case of expressing support for a, a particular stance, but it also might be a case of doing things in support of that stance.

So, you know, um, maybe working with community organisations, uh, donating money to charities who might do work surrounding that cause. Uh, and importantly, also trying to influence how governments are dealing with the cause in terms of policy changes, and so on.

When we're talking about contentious issues, uh, these are essentially issues that are salient. So the things that society at large cares about and places a high priority on. And they're issues on which society is, is divided, on which there is not consensus, where you have passionate support, uh, camps on, on one side, uh, and on the other of the issue.

So some of the things we've seen a lot, uh, some of the issues we've seen prominently in corporate activism are things, like I said at the start, LGBT+ rights issues, uh, gender equality, racial equality, uh, immigration.

And to say that these issues are contentious, it's not a, a sort of value judgement to say, you know, one or the other stance is, is, correct or that these things should be contentious. It's rather a reflection on how society perceives the issue.

Um, and because of this, what is contentious varies according to time and place. What is controversial, or what is polarising now might be different to what is in, in five years' time. These things can be quite difficult to predict.

Now, another important characteristic of activism, uh, corporate political activism is that like, uh, traditional activism, if we can call it that, it aims to produce political change.

So this is not just about transforming the internal practices of a company. It is rather about transforming society, uh, challenging prevailing norms, pushing for changes in the law, influencing governments to, um, act in, in certain ways.

Paul: So how is this different then from corporations taking a stance, maybe having campaigns…

Lewis: …mm-hmm…

Paul: …uh, and having paths that are very much set around non-contentious issues?

Lewis: I think one of the, the key differences really is in the, the way in which the, those stances are received. So if we think about corporations taking stances on non-contentious social and political issues, uh, those are activities that we might put under the banner of, uh, corporate social responsibility, which has been around for a long time, and you know, let's imagine that a company launches a scheme to improve child literacy.

Now, this might produce, a positive societal, uh, impact. It might, uh, positively, it might benefit the company reputationally. Um, and, you know, it's engaging an issue that, that people might care about, but it's unlikely to cause a lot of controversy. It is unlikely to kind of reach the headlines in a newspaper. It's unlikely to make anybody feel particularly incensed.

You know, people might be sort of more or less well disposed towards the stance, but I doubt you're gonna have anybody kind of protesting outside of your company because you've given some, uh, school kids some books to read.

Versus a, a corporate, uh, activist stance where because of the contentious nature of the issue, by definition, you will garner strong support from some people and strong opposition from other people. So, to take an example, um, Nike, uh, did a lot of campaigning, a lot of activism around the issue of, uh, racial equality in America, particularly, uh, between sort of 2016 and 2020 leading up to the, uh, Black Lives Matter protest movement.

Um, and they launched this campaign with, uh, Colin Kaepernick who was a NFL player, Black NFL player, who, um, had protested against police brutality committed against Black Americans by kneeling during the national anthem at the start of NFL games. And he became this kind of lightning rod really for this, this issue of racial justice and of police brutality in America.

Nike ended up, kind of, picking him up and launching a campaign featuring him and kind of promoting that, that cause that he was promoting. And, you know, you saw this, this very, uh, this very polarised and very high-profile response to this campaign.

On the one side you had celebrities like LeBron James, Serena Williams voicing their support for Kaepernick. You had especially kind of younger consumers,

more liberal leaning consumers voicing their support for Nike. But on the other hand, you had people all the way up to the President. Trump was tweeting his anger about this campaign. Uh, you had people posting videos of themselves burning their Nike trainers, cutting the Nike ticks off their socks.

So, you know, you have this, this, this very, very polarised, very, very, uh, high-profile response from consumers. Um, and you know, there's also that propensity to create a political controversy because these engage in active policy debates. You know, it might influence the direction of legislation. Uh, it might influence the direction of elections even. So I think that makes it quite qualitatively different to traditional CSR activities.

Paul: The thing with the Colin Kaepernick, uh, issue as well is it wasn't just what happened with Nike, it was what happened with Colin Kaepernick professionally. Because he was with the San Francisco 49 ERs, his contract ran out and he left them. And for years afterwards lots of quarterbacks in the NFL were being signed up who were seen as being massively inferior to Colin Kaepernick. And everyone was saying, why is no one signing Colin Kaepernick? And the question was always because, is it because of his political activism?

So, we were talking about corporations and what Nike were doing, but on an individual level, Colin Kaepernick was a brand almost, and his brand became toxic to certain NFL teams that maybe had a strong white right wing support base, and therefore could teams afford to bring him in? He never played in the NFL again.

There were talks occasionally of, oh, someone might bring him in for a trial, or maybe they did, but he never actually got signed. And you're able to contrast that with 20, 25 years before that with Nike and Michael Jordan…

Lewis: …mm-hmm…

Paul: …and Nike Air Jordans, and they came out and lots of people were saying to Michael Jordan, why aren't you taking a political stance on anything? It was assumed widely that he was a Democrat and he had very democratic views, and Michael Jordan came out and said, 'Republicans buy sneakers too'.

His thought was very much along the lines of, if I want my sneakers to be successful, I can't take a political stance and come out as being a Democrat because will that stop Republicans buying my product?

Lewis: Yeah.

Jan: But in between there, there's quite a bit of muddy water in there and, and so I can see how your study's, you know, actually carefully delineating around what is activism and what isn't. So having somebody who is, you know, high profile sports person sort of endorsing your, your goods is one thing, but then if they have their own personal political views, that's another thing, which I think is outside of what we're talking about today.

But then using a sports person in a, in, in the way that you described, this is hugely risky for companies to, to undertake. And yet, um, you know, already we are starting, you know, um, all sorts of lights are going off in my head about thinking, oh yeah, I've, I've actually seen some of this.

Jan: So, but, but it is, it feels very risky. Do, do you think it's a risky thing for a company to do?

Lewis: It, it is risky. Yeah, it is risky. Um, and perhaps the riskiest element of it is that you, you really can't avoid that controversy. Trying to avoid controversy is, is its own risk. Because, you know, I think there's, there's this belief that, if you really believe in a stance, if you really sincerely hold a set of values, you should be willing to upset some people by sticking firm to them, you know.

And that when it comes to these very polarised issues, you know, like things like the, the Black Lives Matter movement, uh, in America where you had big divides between, um, supporters of different parties, there is no neutral stance that's going to please everybody. If you try and do that, you are actually going to upset everybody in instance, uh, instead.

Um, and an example of this was, was Pepsi did an advert, uh, you may have seen it with, um, uh. Kendall Jenner, I believe one of the, the, uh, Jenners apologies if I've gotten the, the Jenner wrong…

Jan: …I can't, I can't figure out…

Paul: …Kardashians, Jenners, they're all the same, yes…

Lewis: … it's not my, my subject. But anyway, uh, they, they did an advert and it was kind of linked into some of the protests that were going on around, uh, the Black Lives Matter movement.

Um, and in the advert you have, kind of, the police on one side, you have the protestors on the other side, and Kendall Jenner comes in and diffuses the protest by giving everybody a kind of Pepsi.

And it's this idea that sort of, you know, we all have more in common, Pepsi's gonna bring us together. We can put aside our political disagreements, our values, disagreements, and, and all get along with one another.

And, you know, I think what Pepsi was trying to do there was to, to try and sort of, engage in this, in this issue, but without really picking a side on it, without upsetting anyone. And what happened is they upset everybody, you know? Both sides said, you're trivial, you're trivialising the issue. You are disrespecting our stance. And you know, that they, they got a lot of flack from, from everybody.

Versus, you know, Nike with their activism where they came down strongly on the side of the Black Lives Matter movement. Um, and, you know, it was interesting, there was an interview with, uh, Phil Knight, who's one of the, the founders of Nike, uh, talking about some of the corporate activist campaigns they've done, and talking about the Kaepernick campaign, and he said, uh, you can't go down the middle of the road. You can't try and please everybody. It doesn't matter how many people hate your brand, as long as enough people love it.

So from that perspective, which is, you know, really interesting from a marketing perspective, he's saying upsetting people is not a risk to be avoided. It's a constitutive part of what makes a stance authentic, what makes it legitimate, which I think is a real shift from, uh, traditional branding and also from traditional corporate social responsibility activities.

Jan: They are two really interesting examples, Lewis, and in particular, I was quite interested in the Nike one, that a founder is still involved in the company and might also have a view that sort of influences, has come, come through. So it's also like the owners, or founders, of an organisation, the organisation themselves. And really, you know, really great, you know, high profile examples.

Where else would our listeners, um, have come across this kind of activity say in, in the UK, and maybe with smaller brands, but still quite impactful?

Lewis: Yeah. So, well, one example of people might be familiar with, from, uh, from the UK, I mean, it's, it's an American company, but they, they, they do activism in the UK is, uh, Ben and Jerry's, the ice cream brand.

Jan: Oh, yeah.

Lewis: Um, I mean, this is a really integral part of their identity as a brand. Corporate activism generally, it's, it's kind of become mainstream really in the past 10 years or so. But Ben and Jerry's have been engaged in this for a very long time, really since they were, they were founded back in the, uh, back in the seventies.

Um, and, you know, they integrate their activism into their products quite often. So they had, uh, in recent years, uh, they had a, I'm gonna forget the name of this. They released a, an ice cream flavour called, uh, Save Our Swirled, [Jan laughs] uh, which was, you know, uh, raising the issue of, uh, global warming, climate change.

Um, and you know, in addition to that, if you go on their UK social media accounts, if you go on their TikTok, their Instagram pages, they are doing a lot of activism around, uh, refugee policy in the UK at the moment. Um, and, you know, it's very interesting because they're not only kind of expressing their support for refugees who are in the UK, but they're also making these explicit calls on the government to change policy, calling on it to settle more refugees, calling it on it to set, uh, change policy around, family reunification rules for refugees.

And they're presenting it as a challenge to the government, you know, they're being very critical of them. They're, they're accusing them of kind of misrepresenting this issue of not being honest about it. So, it's a really good example of how, the, the sort of contentious nature of activism, and the fact that it, it goes right into the middle of these very hot button debates that are very high up on the media agenda, on the public agenda.

Um, another example people might have seen is, uh, around Pride month. So this is when we, we, we get a bit of an explosion of, uh, activism in various forms. Where, you know, and this might range from, you know, companies, uh, putting the Pride flag on their products to more deep performance of engagement, um, working with, uh, LGBT+ organisations, campaigning for particular changes in policy.

Uh, Absolut is a good example of this, the vodka brand, um, they have a variant of their product that they call the Rainbow Bottle, it has the Pride flag on it. Um, and you know, perhaps in response to criticisms of people saying, these companies only care about these issues when it comes around to Pride month, and forget about it in the rest of the year, Absolut said, we're gonna sell this

product all year round. You know, Pride is not just for a month, it's for all time. Um, and you know, in addition to that, they, they work with LGBT+ community groups, um, and they've campaigned on a number of issues relating to the community.

Paul: A lot of these things seem to tie in with products…

Lewis: …mmm…

Paul: …so for companies, they're still selling something, making a profit on the back of their support for an activity. But are there examples as well where companies just promote a cause? They're not trying to sell anything with it, they're just say, where they're really just backing a cause without necessarily the obvious commercial revenue, even if they might get commercial revenue just 'cause people might use them because of their backing of the cause.

Lewis: Mm, yeah, so there are, there are examples where, you know, for instance, a company might put out a statement, join, uh, put a signature on an open letter. There've been examples of companies or corporate CEOs, um, filing court cases to, you know, challenge particular laws in relation to, to certain sociopolitical issues.

So in those instances, you know, it might be the company, just speaking as the company, or the CEO speaking as the CEO, rather than relating to a particular product. But there are, there are dangers for this in that, activism that is seen as totally detached from what the company does on a day-to-day basis, uh, can be perceived as inauthentic or as opportunistic, you know.

I mean, to, to take an extreme example, people might not look that kindly on an oil company engaging in, you know, climate change activism, because they might say this, this is completely detached from your day-to-day business operations versus, for example, Oatly, the oat milk company, who do activism around animal welfare, uh, and around climate change. You know, which there, there's, there's a strong link there with their product, which kind of serves as a way of saying, we really believe this and we don't just say it, you know, we put our money where our mouth is, as it were.

At the same time, if you have a deep level of integration with the product in terms of the activism, like those Ben and Jerry, uh, Ben and Jerry's example of the Save Our Swirled ice cream, um, or another one they did, uh, Pecan Resist. [Jan laughs] This was, uh, in relation to the, uh, the Women's March in, in

America in, uh, 2017, playing on the phrase' we can resist'. There's a danger there that people could say you're, you're kind of trivialising the cause, you are instrumentalising the cause, you know, you're, turning this important, uh, sociopolitical issue into a commodity, to sell.

So it can be a difficult balancing act, I think, for businesses.

Paul: Now, I think I'm right in saying just about every example we've used so far would be at one particular end of the political spectrum, which would be the liberal, left side of that spectrum.

Is that the only side, whether you ever see political activism from corporations? Or are there corporations on the right, the conservative side, who act in this kind of way?

Lewis: Um, so there, there absolutely are corporations on the right who, who engage in activism. Now, it, it is true that this has predominantly been something associated with the left of politics. Uh, and this has been dubbed by critics 'woke capitalism', right?

Uh, kind of trying to play on this idea that, you know, businesses, uh, shouldn't be involved in these issues, that it's, uh, it doesn't make sense for businesses to be taking these progressive stances when, you know, we traditionally would've thought them as quite conservative actors in society. Um, so it has predominantly been associated with that part of the political spectrum.

But in recent years, we've seen the growth of corporate activism on the right of politics, um, particularly since the, uh, re-election of, of Trump in America, this has really led to a bit of an explosion of this.

Um, so you have, there's something called the 'parallel economy'. So these are companies that are set up as alternatives to mainstream businesses, which are seen as being, uh, too liberal, basically, to subscribing to these, liberal or progressive values with which big parts of the public do not agree.

Um, so as, as an example, there's a company called Public Square. Um, they are a online payments platform, and they were set up as an online marketplace, uh, almost as kind of a, a right wing alternative to Amazon, uh, exclusively stocking products from companies who sign up to their values, which are, they say, uh, pro-life, pro-freedom, pro-family, um, you know, focusing on American-made products. So, you know, really kind of following Trump's America First ideology, America First agenda.

Now, as well as that there's also been, outside of the parallel economy, there are mainstream companies who, uh, may have moved from one side of the political spectrum to the other. So the, the, tech industry, I think, uh, provides some particularly prominent examples of this. Uh, you know, we can look at Elon Musk, for example, you know, who, who was selling electric cars, products that might have been perhaps bought more by Democrats than Republicans in America, uh, to being a very strong supporter of Donald Trump.

Um, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Meta, another really interesting example on this front. You know, back in 2020, he was voicing his support for the Black Lives Matter movement, you know, alongside Nike and various other companies. Um, he criticised Trump for his actions on the, uh, January the sixth, uh, 2021.

Um, and we've really seen him move quite significantly to the point where now, since Trump's re-election and in the runup to that, he appeared on a podcast and talked about the need for more masculine energy in the workplace.

You know, really kind of echoing some of the sociocultural beliefs of Trump and his supporters, uh, pitching his company's investments in artificial intelligence as being part of this, kind of, nationalistic battle for technological dominance over China.

So there's absolutely no, uh, kind of, it's not a necessary condition of activism that it has to be liberal or progressive. Um, although it is a relatively recent phenomenon that, that we, we've seen it emerge on the right of politics.

Jan: Well, Paul, never knowingly cynical, that's me. [laughs]

Paul: Never knowingly cynical? Hang on, hang on, I, I'll check your CV. No, it definitely says nothing about that in there.

Jan: So, you kind of hinted at this earlier that, um, if you, uh, undertake a cause and sort of, you know, subscribe to it, that it can be interpreted as, woo-hoo, you're on whatever side you're on.

But there must, this must engender a lot of cynicism, which is a risk of its own in terms of, um, you know, people thinking, well company's just doing this to make money, and I'm being manipulated as a consumer and a citizen in order to further making money. Am I right to be slightly cynical about this?

Lewis: I think it, it, you know, it is, when I, when I discuss my research with people, this is the most common response. You know, these are profit making companies, surely the ultimate consideration must be how is this gonna benefit the bottom line.

Now, I, I do think, based on the reading I've done, there are, there are some, kind of, question marks I would put over that interpretation.

Uh, number one, like we've talked about, these are, by their nature, these are contentious issues. Uh, and therefore getting involved in them taking a stance is likely to be divisive. Yes, you may win some customers over, but you may also alienate some customers, right? So, you know, it can be quite unpredictable what effect a campaign is going to have on the bottom line.

And there are many, many instances we could talk about where, uh, you know, if it was done for the purpose of making profit, it's backfired, right? Now another thing to add to that is that the backlash may not only come in the form of customers boycotting you, uh, slandering your reputation on social media, it can also come in the form of political pushback, right?

Because corporate activism engages directly in debates around policy, uh, it can engender punitive responses from governments if they disagree with the stance. Disney, for example, uh, over in Florida, there was, uh, the, the state government wanted to introduce this law that became known as the, the 'don't say gay' law.

And this essentially, uh, prohibited teachers in Florida public schools from teaching children about same-sex relationships and about gender identity. Disney was silent on this at first. They got a lot of pushback from their employees, from their customers, and then they came out strongly, uh, opposing this law.

Now, as a result of that, the Florida government decided to retaliate against Disney. You know, Disney has their, their big theme park, uh, Disney World over in Florida. Um, and they have some kind of, it has a, the territory on which that theme park is located has some kind of special privileges. Disney has some special controls over it, and Florida said, we're gonna take this away from you.

You know, if you wanna get involved in politics, if you want to override our democratically legitimate right to legislate on this issue, then we are going to

retaliate against you. So it's, it's a new level of risk in that it doesn't just come from the customers, it can come from the government as well.

And another thing that the literature shows is that, uh, a key influence behind what kind of standards the company takes, is what the people in the company believe. Both in terms of CEOs, but also in terms of employees. What, what, what is their ideological position? What is their stance?

So these things do suggest that, you know, maybe it isn't as simple as companies just do this to make profit. Now that being said, these are private companies we're talking about. You know, when, we, when we're saying, when we're saying corporations, we mean publicly traded companies who, uh, are, you know, responsible ultimately to deliver returns to their shareholders. So, you know, it's very difficult to see how this doesn't play, um, some kind of a role.

And I think the way to look at it is not necessarily, you know, how did this particular campaign produce, uh, economic benefits for the company? I think they rather look at it in a, in a more long-term strategic view. That engaging in activism, it's not about making a, a buck off each campaign, it's rather about, um, it's rather about reformulating the way they legitimise themselves in society.

That instead of, uh, positioning themselves as just as sellers of goods and services, they instead, uh, adopt a formal legitimacy that is based more on them being a moral authority. Um, so, from that perspective, this is about, kind of, securing their position in the long term, allowing them to continue operating and thus allowing them to continue to make profit.

Um, and you know, one, one final thing I'd add to that is that from a critical perspective, um, we can perhaps see the role that the profit motive plays in corporate activism by the issues that corporations do not address.

So, you know, in terms of things we've talked about, a lot of the issues that, uh, we've discussed in the examples relate to social policy. Uh, there's sociocultural issues, maybe relating to rights. Where corporations have not been active so much is on economic policy.

Uh, there, there's been very, very little campaigning by businesses, in support of, uh, raising corporate taxes, uh, resolving pay equality between workers and

CEOs, increasing regulations on business. So, you know, arguably, arguably this, this, this reveals the, the role of the profit motive in, in activism.

Paul: So a lot of the things, in fact, pretty much everything we've been talking about today, has been done in the public sphere. It's not been done privately. You've not necessarily been talking about companies going to government, say like Florida. They didn't just go have a private meeting with the Florida governor, the Florida Senate, say, we don't agree with this, is there any way we can work on it? They do it publicly.

Is that an important factor when it comes to political activism for corporations? That it needs to be done in the public sphere?

Lewis: Yes. Yeah, it's fufu fundamental to it. And, you know, I think traditional forms of corporate lobbying, which have gone on since time immemorial are very, very different to activism in that the audience for them is very different. And the, the way in which those activities are positioned as being legitimate, as being justifiable, is very different.

If a company lobbies for a change in the law that takes the form of a, kind of a quiet, sometimes even potentially secret or hidden, one-on-one conversation between the company and, you know, a government or a, a legislator. And lobbying is very much positioned in terms of the instrumental benefits that it might, uh, the firm might derive from it, you know?

Oil companies might lobby for looser environmental regulations, for example. or they might justify their lobbying on the basis that they have expertise, uh, to offer the government. You know, we know about this policy area because this is the industry that we operate in.

Corporate activism, the audience is the public at large, so it's not a quiet one-on-one conversation. It is, rather, the, the corporation entering into a much wider conversation as one participant amongst many others. You know, if a, if a corporation wants to take a stance on, uh, immigration policy in the UK, for example, they are one voice amongst citizens, political parties, charities, influencers, newspapers, et cetera, et cetera.

And that kind of, uh, engagement is justified not on the basis of instrumental benefits, not on the basis of expertise, 'cause these issues often have very little to do with day-to-day business, um, but rather on a moral basis, right? On the

basis that this is what we sincerely believe, this is the right thing to do, this is an issue that needs, uh, resolving in some way.

Paul: You never hear 'lobby being' used in a positive way, in my mind. It's if you, you talk about the tobacco lobby, you talk about the oil lobby. You talk about on the other side things, the environmental lobby, it's used by people who don't like the people who were doing the lobbying.

Jan: And building on that, I mean, you'd be in big trouble if you had a public stance and a lobbying stance that were different from each other. [laughs]

I don't, that's how to really muck that one isn't it…?

Paul: …and I think from a corporation perspective as well, if you're doing lobbying privately and it becomes public, even if it matches up with what your stance is anyway, but you just didn't want to make it public, there's a danger there.

So doing private lobbying carries difficulties in terms of if, if it's exposed, even if it matches what you were doing.

Lewis: It does, yeah. It's, you know, I mean this, this is one of the, another risk, at least as far as companies are concerned, concerned of engaging in activism, is that you are inviting this enhanced level of scrutiny on you, that, you know, people will assess. Are your, are your values in alignment with those that you profess? Are your business activities in alignment with the stance that you are promoting?

Um, and especially when it comes to these big global mega-corporations, with, you know, supply chains that, that, that span. The globe. often people find that, you know, in some ways they aren't putting their money where their mouth is.

You know, I mean, we, we can take Nike as an example. Very active on the issue of, you know, equality, social justice in the West. but you know, they, they, they have been known to, pay poor wages to their workers in factories in Southeast Asia, for example. So it, it, does invite this enhanced, uh, level of scrutiny.

And you know, I think there, there's also a question, you know, looking outside of the business perspective and looking more at the, the democratic perspective, uh, there's this idea that by being transparent, that somehow makes it legitimate. You know, that that's the difference, lobbying is done

secretly, it's done covertly, and this is why people, uh, might disagree with it or find it to be distasteful.

And there's this idea that because activism is public, because it's open, that makes it legitimate. But it's still alike to lobbying in that it is still corporations using their private power to exert influence on public matters of politics.

Whether it's openly done or not, you know, that fundamental fact remains the same.

Jan: I remember a wee while ago, lots of companies were, on LinkedIn, were doing the, um, International Women's Day and going, woohoo, we like you, ladies.

And, um, uh, somebody, some, some wag had got all sorts of data and under each comment [laughing] put their gender pay gap down as well. I, I'm sorry, for laughing, but that, that just struck me as a really interesting, I mean, both, yeah. You know, supporting International Women's Day is perhaps not contentious, or maybe it is in some areas, but, uh, but it actually elicited that response.

Paul: There was a way around it. Uh, I, I discovered this completely coincidentally, but if your main social media account for an organisation posted something on it, yes, it would get the response. Actually, your company has X percent of female staff, the wage gap is X…

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: …If you were to post from a subsidiary account, they weren't being monitored. So from here at the University, the University's account would get comeback for anything. Any of the faculties that did anything, and faculties are still quite major, nothing. And other things like that.

So the, the, yeah, there was pushback, but it didn't always push back everywhere that it could have done…

Jan: …oh, I see…

Paul: …and I'm sure there were some big companies that were probably getting away with it. I'm not saying we were getting away with it, we just happened to notice that ours didn't get a response, whereas the central University's posts did get a response…

Jan: …aah, that's interesting…

Paul: …so therefore, were there other big companies that were posting from subsidiaries' accounts and not getting any pushback?

Jan: Well, there we are listeners. There's some tricky political manoeuvring, some, courtesy of Paul Turner. [Everyone laughs]

Paul: Yes, I, I get up to all kinds of shenanigans and lobbying when you're not paying attention…

Jan: …so…

Paul: [joking] …I've been lobbying for your dismissal for quite some time, it's just not worked…

Jan: …oh, well you're not very good at it, clearly.

So drawing that all together, um, I mean, I guess we can't anticipate that society's gonna become less polarised, much as we might find the polarisation quite difficult. So what, what do you see happening in this area in the years ahead?

Lewis: I think we will see increasing caution around corporate activism. But I'm, I'm not sure how far this, this caution will succeed in keeping companies out of it. You know, I mean, certainly since Trump has been re-elected in the US and he has, you know, used his platform as president to push back against companies who he believes are engaging in, you know, progressive activism, expressing support for progressive values. This has made companies quite wary because they're scared of the you know, reputational, political, um, ramifications.

But as you say, polarisation is, is rising. Not, not just in America, but in in Europe. You know, really across the democratic world, we have a very fragmented, very unpredictable politics. And we have societies that are increasingly divided.

In this context, the option of, uh, neutrality on a political issue may no longer be on the table. So, and I think the question for many ways, uh, for, for companies is, um, you know, do you want to wait to be pushed into taking a stance on an issue? Or do you want to kind of proactively, uh, think about how you can craft a strategy to anticipate these, to, you know, ensure that you have a consistent set of values that, that you can use to respond to these issues when they arise?

So that's one thing. Um, I think we'll continue to see, an increasing kind of ideological diversity of corporate activism. Which I think expresses a very interesting kind of change in views on the right of politics. Because really when corporate activism rose to prominence in the, uh, uh, previous decade, um, the response from a lot of, uh, conservative politicians, uh, the response from a lot of, uh, citizens on the right was business should not be involved in politics.

You know, the business of business is business. The old Milton Freeman adage, social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. And we, I think we're seeing a significant change, certainly when it comes to the, you know, the new, the new right, if you wanna call 'em that, the populist right.

That actually, the belief is that it's fine for business to be involved in sociopolitical debates. The problem was just that they were taking the wrong stance before. You know, as long as they profess support for our set of values, it's fine.

And I think this, this potentially puts business in a, in a very, uh, difficult position, right. Um, because you have people on both sides of the political spectrum being willing to criticise them for their sociopolitical stances, it's impossible to please everybody there. And therefore they may face, increasing scrutiny, uh, increasing risks. And, you know, they're operating in a challenging environment where people's expectations are increasing of them. Um, and those expectations are not necessarily reconcilable amongst different parts of society.

Paul: Well, thank you so much for joining us, Lewis, and you were saying you were cynical, Jan. That was a lot of cynicism at the end there. [Everyone laughs]

Jan: I think this might be informed cynicism we're hearing…

Paul: …and yours is uninformed…

Jan: …yes…

Paul: …and just generally cynical…

Jan: …yes.

Paul: Well, thank you very much for bringing your cynicism and realism with you to the podcast, Lewis, it's been great speaking to you.

Lewis: Thank you so much for having me.

[Theme music]

Paul: I think Jan, there's always gonna be a certain amount of cynicism around why corporations are taking a stance on certain political issues, certain social issues.

But from what Lewis has been saying, there's a lot more to it than just profit and the money. There is also an aspect of, these are the genuine views of staff, of people who run corporations. These are long established views. These are people, corporations doing essentially what they think is right.

Jan: And I, the thing that I found quite interesting, 'cause when I first sort of thought about this topic, I really had consumers in the front of my mind. But when he talked about actually employees may exert pressure on organisations to do things as well. Um, so in that respect, if you like, there's more than one audience.

There's, you know, the, you know, the government, you know, policy, audience, there's consumers. There might be business partners as well, although we didn't sort of talk about that in great depth, but I'm sure that would be part of it, and then employees.

I mean, [pause] you just wanna keep your head down, but it sounds like even keeping your head down is not going to be that much of a strategy either.

Paul: No. As Lewis was pointing out, it used to be that it was only the left who were keen on this kind of talk and the right were saying, no, stop it, stop it, don't do that. And now the left and the right are both saying, yes, do it, as long as you do what we want you to do. [Jan laughs]

And yeah, so being silent is no longer an option because people are gonna ask you what your view is on something and just going umming and aahing and trying to hedge your bets is no longer gonna work.

Jan: Ah, that's really tough, really tough. Um, but fascinating as well.

But I do wonder, and there wasn't time, and maybe only time will tell whether or not any of these, uh, stances have actually flown through and affected, um, government policy at the end of the day. I don't know if it would've.

And some of the things that I'm thinking about, actually they're not contentious. So actually it's… [laughs]

Paul: …yes…

Jan: …it's that contention, bit of it…

Paul: …mm-hmm…

Jan: …um, that, that makes it quite hard to imagine how this might play out eventually.

Paul: Yeah, and I dare say, as much as anything, governments have shaped some political stances of corporations as he was pointing out, the tech giants in the US, who very much seem to be our stance will be whichever way the wind is blowing. Uh, we all love Donald Trump now, because he's in power and we need to agree with him if we're gonna continue making our billions and launching ourselves into space, et cetera.

Whereas previously, no, we don't agree with him there. So that, yeah, that's where the cynicism comes in…

Jan: …yes…

Paul: …probably rightly so, with certain companies that just say, yep, our political stance is whatever the politics of the day is.

Jan: Yeah, yeah. Save me from any masculine energy.

So what are we gonna do next? [laughs]

Paul: [laughing] Bring more masculine energy onto the show! Actually that, that's very unfair in our guest because that makes it seem like he will be doing exactly that.

Uh, no. What we're gonna be talking about is moving on from corporate political activism to the potential for individual activism, particularly on the aspect of researchers and…

Jan: …aaah…

Paul: …scientists, to see how that might fit in.

Jan: And that's really interesting 'cause it's, again, another situation where maybe keeping your head down Is not a viable option. So that would be a nice continuation.

Paul: Yes. So we're gonna be joined by Dr. Sam Finnerty from here at Lancaster University, and he's gonna be talking to us about that.

Until then, thank you very much for listening and it's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: And from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]