Year in Review: The Top 10 Business Ethics Stories of 2015
By the editors of Business Ethics Highlights (BusinessEthicsHighlights.com)

It has been a busy year in business ethics and corporate social responsibility. From the cheating carmaker to the price-gouging pharma-bro, to the coffee company that wanted us to have a casual chat about race with the barista, the year has been a cornucopia of case studies in the ethics of commerce. Just about any media outlet’s “year in review” could serve as fodder for a year-long course in business ethics. But we’ve gone ahead and drawn you a roadmap.

Below, the editors of Business Ethics Highlights present their entirely unscientific Top 10 Business Ethics Stories of 2015. This is our list of the top 10 items we reported on during 2015.* To create this list, we looked both for individual stories that had made a big splash, and for companies or individuals who had made the news multiple times for different reasons.

In no particular order, here they are.

**Volkswagen** was perhaps the biggest business ethics story of the year. The attention it got springs from two main sources: first, VW is a big, big, well-regarded company, not some fly-by-night operation. Second, the company didn’t just engage in some sort of minor rule-bending, fiddling along the margins: it outright lied to regulators and to customers regarding a key aspect of its cars’ performance. No wonder people were so interested in the lies the company told, in how it tried to scapegoat its engineers, and in the possibility that there just might not be very much that’s special about Volkswagen, in terms of the company’s likelihood to engage in wrongdoing.

In September, the CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals, **Martin Shkreli**, quickly went from utter obscurity to being the world’s most hated chief executive by buying a company that makes a life-saving pharmaceutical and promptly raising the price from $13.50 to $750 per tablet. Most recent update: Shkreli has been arrested, for fraudulent activity unrelated to his price-gouging. Few tears are being shed, even among those who would defend his price-gouging as an unremarkable side-effect of an otherwise-beneficial free market.

Another issue that has seen a lot of attention this year is the sale of **homeopathy**, and other ‘alternative’ medicines. Toward the end of 2015, we featured a piece by BEH co-editor Chris MacDonald, which generated a huge amount of discussion on social media and which, within 24 hours of publication, became Canadian Business magazine’s most
commented-upon story of the entire year. Check out “Homeopathy: the Ponzi Scheme of Healthcare.” The key idea: relevant experts know that Ponzi schemes can’t make you rich, so they’re illegal. So, by analogy, why hasn’t homeopathy been outlawed yet?

BEH’s own most popular item of the year was a story about BBQ restaurants being “banned” in Austin, Texas. The bylaw the city passed was not a ban, per se, though it was sometimes referred to that way. But it was a proposed limitation on restaurants’ right to emit smoke, which raised interesting philosophical questions about just what counts as pollution, and what counts as nuisance. Frankly, we’re not quite sure why this ‘tempest in a teapot’ topped our stats; are visitors finding our site by mistake while googling BBQ recipes?

Various elements of the so-called ‘sharing economy’ were big in the news this year, and continued to generate controversy. Fans and foes have been vocal. For example, back in September the New York Post published an op-ed on why Airbnb helps make New York more affordable, contradicting those who claim that the accommodations service is driving up the price of lodgings. And ride-sharing service Uber continued to please users while angering traditional taxi companies and frustrating municipal lawmakers.

Another of the big stories of the year involved an organization that most wouldn’t think of as a business in the traditional sense, namely FIFA (the Fédération Internationale de Football Association)—the governing body for soccer worldwide. In May, several of the organization’s leaders were arrested for corruption—but not its bombastic president, Sepp Blatter. The following month, Blatter resigned, and was more recently banned, for 8 years, from participation in any soccer-related activities, by FIFA’s ethics committee.

Fast-food company Chipotle created a tempest in a taco by announcing that it would stop using genetically modified ingredients. Critics called the move anti-scientific, citing the lack of evidence to support anti-GMO sentiment. More recently, suspicions arose that Chipotle’s anti-GMO stance was a smokescreen to distract from the company’s dodgy sanitation practices. Why keep the kitchen clean when you can impress people with your holier-than-thou sourcing practices?

Not surprisingly, wage inequality continued to be an important theme. August saw the release of a list of “CEOs who make at least 800 times more than their employees.” One of the richest men in the world, Warren Buffett, chimed in and agreed that inequality is a problem, but added that one standard prescription – raising minimum wage – is not a solution.

Gender equity was also a big topic in 2015. Women fighting for equality got a boost from high-profile women, including Jennifer Lawrence (lamenting gender-based pay disparities in Hollywood) and tennis superstar Venus Williams (trying to correct the gender-based pay differential in pro sports).
In March, Starbucks announced an ambitious – some would say quixotic – plan to get Americans talking about race. The idea was to encourage customers to chat with baristas about what is without a doubt one of the most pressing social issues of the day, namely race. Skeptics scoffed, mocked, and rolled their eyes. The foam had barely settled on the latte before Starbucks declared that the #RaceTogether campaign was over.

There you have it, our year in review. Each of the stories above involved winners and losers. But then interesting times are always a mixed blessing.

* In fact, BEH only began publishing in March of this year, so our review of the year naturally only goes back to then.

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