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# **Unternehmensverantwortung im digitalen Wandel**

Ein Debattenbeitrag zu Corporate Digital  
Responsibility

# Abstract

Corporate digital responsibility, a new approach that (terminologically) borrows from the field of corporate social responsibility, is beginning to give tangibility to enterprises' responsibility in an era of digital transformation.

Public debates on digital transformation are often focused on risks; as a consequence, the real opportunities with regard to new mechanisms of societal cooperation are often underemphasized. New freedoms, shared knowledge, enhanced social inclusion, more efficient use of resources – the prospects for a better life thanks to digital technologies are manifold. However, the desired effects will not come about automatically. We need changes not only in terms of legislation and regulation, but also with regard to people's actions and attitudes. This requires processes of transformation. Shaping such processes is a joint task; in this regard, companies will necessarily play an important – if also ambivalent – role. As drivers of digital innovation, they often have access to advanced knowledge and digital resources. With the opportunities consequently open to them, they can have a positive or negative impact on digital transformation. With their innovations, companies can be part of the solution to societal challenges, or be part of the problem. This makes it all the more important to answer a key question: What responsibility do companies bear in the digital age? In seeking answers to this question, we can draw on a wide range of lessons learned in the debates over corporate social responsibility (CSR).

As in the current discussion on CDR, there was a great deal of confusion at the beginning of the CSR debate in the early 2000s, for example with regard to which fields of activity were to be associated with enterprises' social responsibility and which were not. Addressing this question was – and remains – necessary in order to align stakeholder expectations with the factors conditioning companies' actions, ideally bringing them together or at least framing the relevant discourse in constructive terms. Over the years, a broadly shared understanding of the normative foundations of CSR has emerged both in academic circles and in practice. This is essentially framed by the following international agreements: the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises; the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; the UN International Labor Organization (ILO) declaration on fundamental labor principles and rights (ILO core labor standards) and the ILO declaration on multinational enterprises and social policy; and finally the 10 principles of the United Nations Global Compact.

This experience allows the following implications to be derived with regard to the coming CDR debate: First, a shared canon of international principles and guidelines will also emerge here, which will ultimately provide a solid foundation for key fields of activity. Second, the EU Commission's CSR definition serves as a frame of reference in this regard

in Europe. On the premise that digitalization will fundamentally change the way we live and work, the classic understanding of CSR must be extended to include the digital dimension. Third, we need a holistic approach in pursuing this goal.

More specifically, we need an integrative and interdisciplinary process in determining both what is desirable and what is feasible. This book aims to be a part of that process. In 48 diverse, occasionally controversial and often complementary contributions, this book's 83 authors bring together their knowledge and positions on the responsibility of companies in the era of digital transformation.

A number of insights relevant to the ongoing CDR debate can be drawn from this book. From the enterprise perspective, the primary question is that of the specific starting point for CDR: What are the primary fields of activity, what instruments have already been developed and what "lessons learned" are available? An exchange of practical examples is necessary, because CDR must ultimately demonstrate its value and acquire visibility within the context of everyday corporate activity, under conditions of competition and conflicting interests.

From the stakeholder point of view, the issue of CDR verifiability with respect to binding rules is particularly relevant – that is, the degree to which we need new (regulatory) provisions and governance standards. Similarly, we must ask which previous limitations we should preserve or seek to overcome. The discussion regarding regulatory frameworks is necessary because responsibility can only be allocated and overseen effectively using common points of reference.

From the overall societal perspective, there is a need for further discussion on the ethical foundations of CDR. How do we deal with the fundamental (value) conflicts and dilemmas that will arise in the context of new digital opportunities? The debate on digital ethics is necessary because we have to make basic policy decisions regarding the design of regulations, business models and value-creation processes: What digital options do we want to exploit, and where will we impose restrictions?

In the interests of a commonly held, well-founded and practical understanding of CDR able to guide action, it will be critical to promote the exchange of views not only within, but particularly between these three perspectives.

In the coming months of 2020, the various problems associated with the COVID-19 crisis will surely eclipse the deeper CDR debate. At the same time, new opportunities are opening up. This is because the situation is forcing us to experiment with digital solutions. With regard to opportunities and unintended consequences, we must always cast our thoughts beyond the present crisis. As historian Yuval Harari recently wrote: "This storm will pass. But the choices we make now could change our lives for years to come." We will thus stay focused on these issues – with the authors included here, our networks and all interested parties.