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Fairphone: much more than a fair phone

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Fairphone is much more than a fair phone.

Fairphone is a fairer phone but it is firstly a movement. Any movement is a transformation of the world, something that continuously changes and evolves. Fairphone is a movement transforming the world, continuously changing and evolving. This is the most important thing I understood from a discussion with Laura Gerritsen (Impact and Development).

Fairphone aims to do things differently. It is "creative, innovative, involving and incorporating many different ideas aiming at changing something not envisioned to be changed." The primary importance is given to "the process", "the difference is in how to do things".

Of course Fairphone has an ambition in terms of "fair economy", an objective to pay more attention to "human values". But this is "without determining top down what is fair", which is done through "debate" as "fairness is subjective".

The dynamics is not merely motivated by a clear vision of what has to be changed: "this can be debated." Indeed, the opening of a conversation by providing a "platform for discussion" may be the first transformation Fairphone has already accomplished.

I especially liked the expression that "...in a sense, values are created". In line with the approach taught in my course, this is an existentialist approach to ethics. Fairphone is not bound by a dogmatic approach defining first what is ethical. They first try to build a very large perspective in order to understand what happens in the field and then act appropriately (see the blog of Laura for what she does around mining, a major issue for the supply-chain of phones).

Fairphone has understood that ethics remains a grey zone. By promoting "transparency" through a debate they want to be "inclusive". But transparency also means being open about what you have not been able to achieve and what remains to be improved, such as working conditions at mine sites. Hence, Fairphone is not exempt of unfair issues. There is much more to do evidently and they have noted that "being open about the issues you have not been able solve and why does not necessarily lead to more (negative) criticism, but is key to develop a constructive debate".

In fact, they have been criticized a lot and this has empowered them. "If you take critics seriously, it leads to a good discussion and a good learning. It does not need to be always easy but it can be very useful." Sometimes, misinformed supporters can also raise issues, for instance by saying wrongly that the phone is biodegradable or fully recyclable. Things are both fair and unfair which, as we know, does not imply that they are equally fair (see ethics as a grey zone).

In class, we often discuss why Apple, Samsung or Sony have not yet launched such a product. For Laura, this is not just about the product. "You can have 1 product over 20000 that is more fair and ecological but what does it mean?" More important is whether there is a change in approach and social and environmental values are integrated in the everyday decision making and activities of companies.

"At Fairphone, the DNA is different. Still, we know we are a small company and believe we need to work together

with all players to trigger a change that goes beyond Fairphone. By establishing the market for ethical products we hope to motivate the entire industry to act more responsibly".

More than a fairer product, Fairphone creates a movement with transparent and inclusive discussions about how to move forward.

Questions for reflection:

" Under which conditions a clear vision of the future is not necessary to accomplish a great project?

" Why, when and for whom it can be difficult to accept that a fairer phone may not be entirely a fair phone?

" Why, when and for whom communicating about ethical vulnerabilities can be appropriate?

" If a company can be "a movement", what would it mean for you as a person to be "a movement"?