

Canadian Cannabis Industry and Social Responsibility: The Case of Canopy Growth

Industria cannábica canadiense y la responsabilidad social: el caso de Canopy Growth

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ABSTRACT

Through the ethnographic research developed primarily in the city of Smiths Falls, Ontario and desk review that included the consultation of digital platforms and the problematization of the concept of social responsibility, the objective is to reflect on the relationship between the corporate discourse of Canopy Growth and its social responsibility practices. The article is made up of different sections; first, it reflects on the incipient literature and its contradictions regarding cannabis through the lenses of various disciplines, as well as on the historical development of the concept of corporate social responsibility within capitalism, subsequently it identifies narratives regarding social responsibility promoted by Canopy Growth in its press releases and other digital inputs and some counter-narratives issued by other stakeholders. Finally, the narratives of members of the interest groups are presented, giving prominence to former Canopy Growth workers who, share their first-hand experiences in the corporation. The conclusions demonstrate the multiple inconsistencies that Canopy Growth embodies when raising the concept of social responsibility in its media discourses. These were evidenced by personnel who worked for the corporation in the city of Smiths Falls, Ontario. Knowing the *modus operandi* of a leading corporation in the cannabis industry gives us the tools that are necessary to envision its potential actions in Mexico given that Canopy Growth has shown an interest in expanding into our territory for several years.

Key words: cannabis, Canada, social responsibility, Canopy Growth, narratives.

RESUMEN

A través de la investigación etnográfica desarrollada fundamentalmente en la ciudad de Smiths Falls, Ontario, del trabajo de gabinete que incluyó la consulta de plataformas digitales y la problematización del concepto de responsabilidad social, se tiene como objetivo reflexionar sobre la

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relación entre el discurso corporativo de Canopy Growth y sus prácticas de responsabilidad social. El artículo está integrado por distintos rubros, primeramente, se reflexiona sobre la incipiente literatura y sus contradicciones en torno a la cannabis bajo lentes de diversas disciplinas, al igual que sobre el devenir histórico del concepto de responsabilidad social corporativa dentro del capitalismo, posteriormente se identifican las narrativas sobre responsabilidad social enarboladas por Canopy Growth en sus comunicados de prensa y otros insumos digitales y algunas contranarrativas emitidas por otros stakeholders. Finalmente, se presentan las narrativas de miembros de los grupos de interés, dando protagonismo a los extrabajadores de Canopy Growth quienes, de primera mano, externan sus vivencias en la corporación. Las conclusiones evidencian las múltiples incongruencias que Canopy Growth encarna al querer enarbolar el concepto de responsabilidad social en sus discursos mediáticos. Estas fueron evidenciadas por el personal que laboró para la corporación en la ciudad de Smiths Falls, Ontario. El conocer el *modus operandi* de una corporación líder en la industria de la cannabis nos da herramientas para vislumbrar su posible actuar en México. Canopy Growth ha evidenciado su interés de expansión en nuestro territorio desde hace varios años.

Palabras clave: cannabis, Canadá, responsabilidad social, Canopy Growth, narrativas.

RESEARCH ON CANNABIS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: A NICHE TO INNOVATE

Due to the illegality of cannabis, literature and research on the plant is still in its infancy (I. Brown 2018), preventing the public from accessing enough information to form a critical stance towards the plant within the value chain.

The few investigations that exist regarding cannabis have had variations in terms of approaching and problematizing the issue, which in turn has led to different results. In this regard, different contradictions have been identified. For instance, a few years ago, the journal *Global and Mail* published an article that explored how cannabis consumption affects the youth. Researcher Adriana Barton highlighted some of the contradictions found when analyzing academic papers, Canadian Ministry of Health publications, and media reports (Barton, 2014). For its part, Health Canada's article (2016) notes that the public tends to exaggerate either the risks of cannabis consumption or classify it entirely as benign. While on the other hand, through the emergence of the green gold boom, companies are contributing to the destigmatization of cannabis through the transformation of the significance and uses of the plant, converting it into a commodity. In this sense, the market, through this revised information, is rapidly exploring and consolidating different markets such as tourism, marketing,

and gastronomy, among others. Therefore, we agree that “the management of public opinion, conflicting and hindered scientific research, and legislative discussions have fueled the debate about the existence or not of the harms or benefits that can be attributed to the use of cannabis and its derivatives” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2017: 9).

We cannot deny that Canadian research on cannabis has gone through various stages across the past decades, with the Le Dain Commission in 1969 as its trailblazer. That is, prior to the creation of the Commission, there was a tendency to stigmatize everything related to the plant. While, during and after the Commission, research has delved into the damage that the substance causes, the psychological effects, and the behavior of its’ consumers. Nowadays, despite the diversity in the research around cannabis, there has been a greater focus on those which emphasize the risks of its use in the recreational aspect (as research names it) and the benefits in the medical field. However, though most investigations have substantially focused on the medical field, multiple questions are yet to be adequately addressed (Brewster, 2019). There is a need to create research that generates recommendations regarding the role of science in relation to the corruption of corporations in lobbying to promote certain industries and practices. As well the full disclosure of conflicts of interest between publications and researchers, and the support of investigations not linked to corporations (Shover and Humphreys, 2019). It is precisely the issue of social responsibility linked to corporations in the cannabis industry that is addressed in this article.

We consider it fundamental to reflect on the role that Canopy Growth has played over the years, especially in terms of employment within Canada, given that said corporation is looking to expand not only in the North American region but also at a global level. Although in Mexico the legalization of cannabis is still *pending*, the strategies in which the corporation generates its profits, *the respect or disregard of labor rights* and the application of the concept of social responsibility in its policies are actions that we have to know since Canopy Growth will surely follow similar patters in other localities. So, the primary objective is to identify the narratives regarding the social responsibility of some of the actors who constitute the interest groups. The analysis of these narratives allows us to identify how much the corporation, in this case, Canopy Growth adheres through its practices to the values that it manifests in its discourse. To achieve the above stated, interviews were carried out through Zoom and in the city of Smiths Falls, Canada, matrix headquarters. In addition, to enrich the investigation, the press releases issued by the corporation were analyzed, as well as publications made in other digital media.

Discussions around the concept of corporate social responsibility have been developing for more than half a century, being the post-war period where they begin to

take greater force and different nuances as a strategic response from the same companies to the crisis caused by the Second World War. Social responsibility has become the object of study of disciplines that initially did not consider it as such. Economy, administration and finance were the first ones to focus on it, as through these areas of knowledge it was sought to build, strengthen, disseminate, and legitimize social responsibility as a new form of accumulation and competitiveness in capitalism, under ethical ideas that, as history has shown through various cases, have not been respected by various corporations and companies.

At present, sociology, philosophy, political science, and anthropology have generated research that contributes to the knowledge of this multidimensionality of social responsibility and to problematize and deepen, from more critical and integrative perspectives, the constant contradictions of the concept; such are the cases of García (2018), Chicaiza (2018) and Navarro (2007). Concurring with Saldaña (2009), that the role that academia should have before the movement of the philosophy of social responsibility of companies and its incidence on public policies must be critical and be sustained by innovative theoretical epistemological approaches and methodologies that capture the different views of this trend. In this sense, we consider it fundamental to generate guidelines where the issues around the social responsibility of companies and their impact on public policies are made visible from the perspectives of their workers, their families, consumers, and the communities where the companies are located, as well as shareholders and administrators (the board of directors); and to not only consider the perspectives of the corporations and or transnationals but to also work jointly with small and medium sized- companies, since there is very little research in this regard (Maldonado et. al, 2015). It is precisely through contrasting the voices of grassroots workers with the discourse of the corporation that we can identify how social responsibility practices are carried out and whether they are congruent with the values promoted by said construct, at least in the labor dimension. We consider, like Saldaña (2009), that until employees stop being conceived as resources and begin to be treated as subjects, it will be until then that the sense of social responsibility will be something more concrete than just a euphemism or a marketing resource. With the participation of the workers themselves, it will be possible to transform the practices of what is understood by social responsibility, directing them towards sustainable mechanisms for employees, communities, the environment, and interest groups in general.

Although there are considerable differences in the understanding of and, of course, in the implementation of social responsibility between different companies, it is crucial to delve into the study of this stream of business thought within companies linked to the cannabis industry, because, as a nascent and global industry, an

industry more consistent with the precepts of social responsibility could be built from the ground up. This action is not only important in theoretical terms, but also because it gives us the possibility of analyzing in depth the work, environmental, and ethical contexts in which the new industry is developing within legal frameworks, since it will surely be a sector in the medium term that will become an example for others to follow, due to its rapid and intense growth, and in which it would be well worth promoting from the beginning, practices of respect towards the workers, the communities, the environment, and of course, the consumers.

We consider it fundamental to carry out this approach through the narratives of the workers themselves and other members of interest groups in cannabis companies, because, agreeing with Scolofsky and Spetter, corporate social responsibility begins precisely with the workers due to, as the first interest group they are: “a) the human capital that manages the rest of the business resources and, therefore, the smooth running of the company depends on them, and b) it is necessary to seek excellence within the company” (Scolofsky and Spetter, 1987, cited in Ojeda, 2018: 59).

This leading role of the workers in social responsibility has been included in initiatives on a global scale by various organizations, such as International Labour Organization (ILO), with its Global Jobs Pact, adopted by the International Labor Conference on June 19, 2009, and the UN, with the Global Compact, where of the ten principles that are promoted, four are closely related to work.

NARRATIVES IN CANOPY GROWTH PRESS RELEASES AND OTHER DIGITAL MEDIA

Although information about companies currently circulates dizzyingly on endless digital platforms, their press releases and bulletins remain part of a marketing strategy and an important communication tool with the media. According to a survey applied to five hundred twenty-seven professionals from seven countries, including Canada, most stress its relevance (Cision, 2020). However, in this digital age there have been a series of transformations in the communication objectives of organizations, with access to their information being one of the most relevant, and not only for consumers, but also for the general public.

The first direct reference to social responsibility that was included in the press releases found on Canopy Growth’s official website dates from April 13, 2017, titled “Canopy Growth Reaffirms Funding for Corporate Social Responsibility Programs and Public Education” (Canopy Growth, 2017a), a document which shows the corporation’s interest in making itself known to Canadians and globally as a socially

responsible company, by publicizing the donations it made to different social causes, such as support for local culture and health initiatives, as well as the organizations Canadian Drug Policy Coalition and Mothers against Drunk Driving Canada.

In another press release on the same date, Canopy Growth discussed its position on the responsible consumption of cannabis and the support provided to achieve it through education, as well as their interest in the current discussion at that time on packaging and promotion of cannabis in relation to the care of its consumers and the quality of its products (Canopy Growth, 2017b).

As we will see in the other press releases, this relationship between social responsibility and education in terms of raising awareness and building new knowledge around cannabis permeates a large part of the corporation's actions when it comes to expressing in writing its commitment as a socially responsible company. Future research could center on generating mechanisms to evaluate the impacts of these actions on the interest groups to which they are oriented, which would make it possible to analyze on one hand, social responsibility in the field of practice and, on the other hand, rethink, if necessary, the activities around social responsibility.



Visitor Centre Canopy Growth, Smiths Falls, Ontario. Photo: Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo

Continuing with this revision of corporate narratives in its press releases, on April 26, 2017, it was found that Canopy Growth presented information directed to

its stakeholders and patients, specifically, regarding the purchase mechanism through the online page, Tweed. In the same manner, it made explicit its information transparency practices regarding the necessary care in the use of pesticides, control and evaluation systems in its products, as well as in regards to the creation and exposure of this same information through their reports and their website (TweedMainStreet.com, in Canopy Growth, 2017c).

For the month of May of the same year, Canopy Growth announced the creation of its subsidiary Tweed Grasslands, in Saskatchewan, specifically in the town of Yorkton, which generated around fifty jobs, an action that the corporation managed as part of the responsibility the company had with the communities where it was being established (Canopy Growth, 2017d). That same month, the company announced the organization of an event in Smith Falls named Front Yard Shindig, which included music, games, food sales, and other recreation activities for its inhabitants. With this strategy, the firm sought to position itself as an active member of the community through the promotion and instrumentalization of activities conceived with the label of social responsibility. Its former director, Bruce Linton, commented the following regarding said celebration: "We want to play a positive role as a member of the community here in Smiths Falls with an event that can bring people together for a fun-filled day with their families" (Canopy Growth, 2017e).

During June 2017, Canopy informed its stakeholders and shareholders about its development and activities at a global level. Some of its relevant actions, which followed the line of social responsibility, referred to the visibility of information linked to the continuity of support for "compassionate prices" so that people who needed medical cannabis had access to treatments at lower prices and seeds for self-cultivation, as well as the decision to continue with its medical training programs, initiatives that distinguished the company for being the first to implement them in the cannabis field. In the same manner, it was recognized by German authorities for its good manufacturing practices. Furthermore, the press release manifested its position as a leading company in Canada thanks to the aforementioned training program for doctors, clinical research and social responsibility, which in turn gave it solid foundations to transcend with greater force in the international market, with Germany and Chile, through its Spektrum brand, as the main countries where it ventured in those years (Canopy Growth, 2017f).

In the press release of June 28, 2017, Canopy Growth's collaboration with associations like Canadian Students for a Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP) and Parent Action on Drugs (PAD) was revealed, with the objective that the corporation put into operation its next phase of social responsibility policies in the educational field, with the slogan of promoting the responsible consumption of cannabis, focused mainly on

the youth sector. This stage was contemplated for a period of two years (Canopy Growth, 2017g). Under this same collaborative and educational approach, Canopy announced their support for the research and creation of a guide and recommendations for the use of cannabis with a medical focus on pain management, quality of life and the search for well-being. Said project was in collaboration with Canadian Aids Society and Cannabis Research Task Force (Canopy Growth, 2017h).

After acquiring Canopy Growth, the former executive director of Spot Therapeutics Inc. in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Bruce Linton, mentioned in the press release of August 28th that with the commitment to growth they would guarantee a significant contribution to the local economy (Canopy Growth, 2017i). While Tweed Farms, a subsidiary of Canopy in Niagara-on-the-Lake, expanded, the press release highlighted the use of infrastructure that is friendly to the environment, as well as the creation of just over a hundred jobs (Canopy Growth, 2017j). In the case of expansion in Newfoundland and Labrador and the rest of the provinces, Bruce Linton referred to the presence of the firm as follows: "Wherever we operate we look for ways to integrate ourselves into the local community to make sure we are giving back to the communities we call home" (Canopy Growth, 2017k). Another of the expansions and transformations was the Les Serres Stéphane Bertrand Inc. greenhouse, which, by associating with Canopy Growth, would stop growing tomatoes to become Les Serres Vert Cannabis Inc., a cannabis producer. In their press release, they highlight the second company's commitment to building an international business with a solid national platform, which at the same time supports the local communities in which it operates through the creation of jobs, the significant participation of interested parties and local economic opportunities (Canopy Growth, 2017l).

Based on the same vision of social responsibility through education, Canopy Growth, in partnership with New Brunswick Liquor Corporation (NBLC), trained sales staff with the goal of promoting social responsibility and responsible consumption, according to Brian Harriman, president and CEO of NBLC (Canopy Growth, 2018a). It is worth mentioning that the course was also taught in the rest of the provinces.

Drawing on the same narrative, Mark Zekulin, also a former president of Canopy Growth, asserted: "Our Corporate Social Responsibility strategy is based on listening to communities and stakeholders and supporting in areas where awareness and education can contribute positively to society". He added: "Working with partners like PAD and CSSDP, we can use our resources to make a difference for the youth in Canada and around the world" (Canopy Growth, 2018b), an initiative that was shortly thereafter joined by organizations that consider education as a fundamental factor in their activities. Such are the cases of Niagara College, with its vision to generate an impact in the Niagara region; Beckley Canopy, by financing research related

to various narcotics; the University of British Columbia, for conducting studies on opioids and cannabis; by Centric Health Corporation, the Arthritis Society and Jack Nathan Health, for their training efforts on the potential of cannabis in the medical arena; by Uber and MADD, for their work raising awareness about the potential risks of driving under the influence of cannabis, etc. Evolution Health Systems, for its part, generated digital educational tools to inform about cannabis and, finally, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), in collaboration with Spectrum Therapeutics, also developed an educational program for the use of cannabis in health job centers.

Probably, one of the greatest accomplishments of Canopy Growth in terms of social responsibility was the creation of Tweed Collective. The corporation invested twenty million Canadian dollars in social responsibility initiatives whose objective was to transform the meaning of where and how one lives. This program is based on three pillars: Grow Opportunities, Grow Greener, and Grow Connections (Canopy Growth, 2019a).

A concern among stakeholders was the combination in the consumption or sale of cannabis with alcohol and/or tobacco, since it can magnify the risks. Another was to obtain a portion of the taxes they paid to support cannabis-related research, such as educational campaigns to inform Canadians about the risks of consuming said plant while driving (Health Canada, 2016).

Another of the actions mentioned in the press releases refers to the support that Canopy Growth provided around the values of sexual diversity and equity in relation, specifically, to the LGBT community, by contributing to making their march visible (Canopy Growth, 2019b).

From the exploration carried out around the narratives linked to social responsibility by the official voice of Canopy Growth, it is evident how they described a constant commitment to consumers, as well as to shareholders. When the corporation partnered with another entity, received or generated an investment with another company or subsidiary, it was also frequently disclosed in the communications that these were actions that were carried out for the benefit of the shareholders. In the same way, it is very noticeable that when the topic of social responsibility was mentioned, on many occasions they focused on the educational field, to a lesser extent on the environment, and that ethical aspects were practically not mentioned.

Another fact to reflect on is that the narratives of the Canopy Growth press releases were in charge of reaffirming that the communities where the corporation had a presence in terms of infrastructure had been named as their homes, their houses. In this sense, normally when any construction or expansion of Canopy Growth was underway, emphasis was placed on the importance of creating jobs for the members of the community; however, thereafter fewer and fewer programs contributed to strengthening the communities from non-philanthropic perspectives.

Another of the materials reviewed to explore Canopy Growth's narratives around social responsibility was the report that the corporation presented regarding the ESG criteria (Environmental, Social and Governance) related to the environment, social issues, and governance. Said models and concepts, to which the market and corporations adapt to by generating projects that include these new "social concerns" and "moral principles," are embodied in the report prepared by Canopy Growth, which put it at the forefront as a corporation concerned with the global standards of corporate responsibility championed by organizations such as the UN.

In this report, the corporation was profiled as a company driven by a passion to improve people's lives, end cannabis prohibition, and empower communities by unleashing the potential that cannabis offers. The corporation recognizes itself as the leading organization in the industry that marked, through innovation, the course to follow; complemented by its extensive participation in the community through various programs and donations. Similarly, the report stressed its commitment to its workers and to the communities where it operates, as well as to its customers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ethics was included as part of the topics presented in said report, which Canopy Growth developed and applied at different levels in accordance with its Code of Business Conduct and Ethics. Likewise, the firm reiterated its commitment to social responsibility through training, courses, and other support for its employees and clients; management of quality products based on safety standards; promotion of research development, as well as support for public policies that promote the interests of patients, seek to improve public health, promote social justice and seek to accelerate legal access to cannabis (Canopy Growth, 2021a and 2021b). In the aforementioned report, the information related to the SDGs was organized and highlighted, especially with objectives 3, 10, 13, 16 and 17, that is, those that concern health and well-being; the reduction of inequalities; climate action; peace, justice and strong institutions, and alliances to achieve these objectives, respectively. It should be noted that practically all the information in this document can be found more extensively in the press releases that the corporation had previously published on its website.

When reviewing user comments regarding the information disclosed on the Canopy Growth Facebook page, users frequently expressed, on the one hand, a complaint about the low value of the shares, which impacted shareholders' profits and, on the other hand, annoyance over layoffs and plant closures in various parts of Canada. All this was reflected in some of the testimonies recovered: "Ross Duffield: How much plastic and garbage did you leave from the failed hemp crop outside Cooperstown, New York?". This comment is a response to a publication by Canopy Growth on January 5, 2022, regarding the company's social responsibility and sustainability reflected in its report on social and environmental governance.

Previous narratives put forward by Canopy Growth and by Facebook users show discrepancies on how certain issues should be addressed and the intentions behind making the information public.

Focusing on the workplace from the perspective of corporate social responsibility, we undertook a review of the comments posted by users on the Indeed website, a company dedicated to job offers and worker recruitment.

When entering the name of Canopy Growth in its search engine, a total of two hundred eighteen opinions appeared up to May 2022, which were, for the most part, not favorable for the corporation. Based on the page's star-based ranking, most ranked the Canadian company at the bottom rung, with just one star, with a clear predominance of comments coming from the city of Smiths Falls.

The comments exposed some of the ongoing issues related to corporate mismanagement, a lack of connection between the corporation and its staff, as well as poor organizational communication. The work environment was described as stressful and toxic, leading to mental health problems. Furthermore, the feedback exhibited that there was no real concern for the professional or psychological health of the workers; they also refer to a rather disorganized labor structure, with unjustified dismissals and promotions that do not correspond to the skills of the position, but rather that were given through friendship ties with the directors. Despite most of the comments being negative, there are also positive ones. The latter are directly related, above all, to some benefits provided by the corporation, as well as good co-workers and the learning experience in this new industry. Below we reproduce some of the testimonials that in some manner encompass the most common opinions, both negative and positive:

Management bullies people and does nothing about bullying, they treat all the good employees who work their heads off to get their precious numbers terribly. There is no way of escalating within the company unless you are a sycophant with Management and become their favorite; they really do not care whether you are qualified or not. Nepotism shows itself in an obvious way. In Management, they are all "silly supervisors", who are there with their disastrous attitude and believe that they are above all because of their job position. There is no proper organization nor communication. If something goes wrong it is quite likely you are responsible, they'll meet you and incompetent people who shouldn't be in a position of authority will talk to you like you're a kid, it's like going back to high school. They do not pay you to do extra tasks like putting together a group and managing it or being an operator, they don't value their employees, you can work for years for the same salary. The company claims to have a great reputation, but they are highly unprofessional and the environment is toxic to work in, don't waste your time (Production worker, Smiths Falls, Ontario, June 26, 2020, on Indeed).

I worked for Canopy Growth for nearly four years. It started out great, but then it was taken over by Constellation Brands. After the merger they cut our benefits, they gave us more work without compensation. Management is horrible at their job and has no knowledge of the cannabis industry, they do not care about their employees, only profits. The final quality of the products has fallen for more profit. An atmosphere of fear is used to keep employees quiet and orderly or there is a risk that they will “let you go”. Employees have been exposed to dangerous situations and those who have spoken out have been fired. Human Resources has been used to protect Management. Everyone needs to stay away from this extremely toxic company (Grower, Smiths Falls, Ontario, April 21, 2021, on Indeed).

First, let me clear something up: Canopy Growth has saved Smiths Falls, [because] the increase in quality of life and value of my property are directly tied to the growth of the grass in a positive way (Junior Supply Chain Analyst, July 23, 2019, in Indeed).

Good people with lots of opportunities for growth and advancement if you work hard. Excitement of pioneering a whole new industry, helping to create the roadmap. Entrepreneurs who work transversally to create history. Fast-paced environment and an unbeatable culture. Play a role, however small, in improving the quality of life for so many. Fun and inclusive leadership (anonymous, Smiths Falls, Ontario, November 5, 2019, on Indeed).

THE NARRATIVES OF STAKEHOLDERS: THE COMMUNITY OF SMITHS FALLS AND ITS LINKS WITH CANOPY GROWTH

The information that was used in the writing of this section was obtained through a qualitative methodological approach, 34 semi-structured interviews were completed and recorded with informed consent; the analysis of these interviews was then carried out. The topics addressed in the interviews were: recruitment, hiring, work's insights, social responsibility practices, and working conditions (safety, benefits, training).

We interviewed with ex-employees and other people of interest through Zoom meetings during 2021 and 2022 and face-to-face interviews during a stay at Smiths Falls in 2022. Some of the actors that had been considered for an interview were active workers at Canopy Growth at the time, which made the interviews impossible due to the restrictions they are under when it comes to providing information, since they signed Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs), which is the reason why it was decided *in situ* to look for employees who had been fired from the corporation as a consequence of the multiple layoffs. In fact, the NDAs are valid not only while the person is employed, but also up to one year after leaving the company. For this reason, only people who met this requirement and were already free of the aforementioned commitment were interviewed.

It is important to consider that, while their narratives present only one of the many faces of the corporation, these, without a single doubt, show us an interpretation of the relations and realities they built before and after their stay at Canopy Growth. To these narratives we can add those of the people who, due to their activities both in the cannabis industry and inside the community of Smiths Falls, contribute to the understanding of the relationship between social responsibility and cannabis.

SECRECY IN A RISING INDUSTRY

There are certain physical and virtual spaces of a company that are practically impassable for most people, and in this case also for researchers. This situation became evident when we wanted to establish communication via the official website of Canopy Growth with someone who could inform us about the possibility of interviewing various members of their interest groups. This search started in 2021. At the beginning of 2022, due to the null response, we followed with the strategy of sending specific mails to the representatives of different areas such as Communications and Human Resources, among others, and of trying to contact them via telephone; nevertheless, this search was also fruitless. Finally, when I arrived to Smiths Falls, an email was sent through a previous contact to the Strategic Communications area, who only granted a 30-minute Zoom interview with a representative of Government and Stakeholder Relations to take place, and also informed us of the following: “we are not permitting onsite visits as there is no one onsite who is permitted to speak on behalf of the organization” and, likewise, not outside of them; this latter situation we verified when we approached, during several days, the workers in the surroundings of their workplaces to ask them if they could allow us to interview them, but they explained that they were not allowed to speak about anything related to the corporation given that they had signed an NDA.

The interview that Strategic Communications had programmed prior to revising the questions and scheduling was canceled a couple of hours before taking place with the following argument: “I wanted to say thank you again for sharing these questions with me—after reviewing, many of these are not within Sean’s scope or within parameters of information we are able to share externally at this time. As such, I have canceled the meeting held on both of your calendars” (Jennifer White she/her Senior Manager, Strategic Communications, personal email, June 8, 2022, 10:49 a.m.).

The entire process described demonstrates how complicated it is to approach corporations to obtain information, at least this was the case with Canopy Growth, from which, from the outset, a couple of things can be inferred: the information about

what happens in certain companies or corporations in the Canadian cannabis industry still constitutes a kind of taboo, with its respective obligation of secrecy, which generates a certain form of paranoia due to the fear that it could be revealed. In the same manner, in certain corporate spaces the value of transparency remains as a utopian aspiration. From the previously stated, a contradiction arises regarding this “inaccessible information” in that it is not clear what it is about and, due to this, depending on the instance in question, the management of it will be more or less radical.

The transition from the illegal cannabis market to the legal one involves a total transformation of the chain of production, a process in which Canada, especially at the beginning, experienced, on one hand, a burnout among businesspeople due to the enormous amount of paperwork and bureaucratic formalities and the lack of clarity in the processes and, on the other hand, had to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars to be in line with the norms established by the different governments. In addition to the above, it is important to point out the interest of companies to position themselves as fast as possible and in the best manner possible in the market in order to be sufficiently competitive and attract clients massively and as soon as possible in what has become known as the “green gold rush.” In this sense, corporations and companies are permanently concerned with controlling absolutely everything related to the business, and of course, information is a key element in this control.

On the other hand, one of the main pillars that constitutes the framework of social responsibility is transparency. Most of the literature agrees that it is a key factor if what is sought is to generate a positive value to society: “Information transparency constitutes a reliable value of the paradigm that constitutes the corporate social responsibility of an organization. With less transparency, the indexes and values that are contemplated in relation to said responsibility are certainly less and of a scarce nature.”

NARRATIVES OF CONFLICTS WITH CANOPY GROWTH: IMPACTS IN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In general terms, a large part of the population of Smiths Falls expressed several degrees of disagreement with the actions of Canopy Growth. This problem arose when Bruce Linton, founder and CEO of Tweed, was laid off. The narratives mentioned, as a yearning of sorts, the human quality of Linton and his interest in the development of the community and, in that sense, he has been recognized for his practices which are in line with the concept of social responsibility.

Due to his dismissal, the support for the development of the community by the company has stopped being important in its goals, a circumstance which has impacted

in a negative way several of the programs which Bruce Linton believed in and incentivized with firmness. Bruce, as he is called by those who know him, had the capacity of convincing and including the entire community in his project, and making his project become part of the mystic of each and every worker of Tweed, as the following testimonies describe:

Bruce Linton was actually out there in the company. You could run and you could walk up to him in the hallway. You could see him in the lunchroom. You could have a conversation with the actual owner of the company. You could sit there and talk to him and discuss ideas you never had. It always felt welcoming when he was around. The company was a lot more comfortable, a lot more relaxed. Everyone had a bigger smile on their face because it wasn't that stressful. He knew it was going to be a few years before things kind of fell into place because he had to deal with regulations and then start lobbying and getting equipment working properly. So at the beginning it was all about the people because you didn't have all of the machines working yet or they hadn't bought them yet. So it was all done manually. So you have to take care of your employees. So at the beginning when Bruce was in charge, it was all about the employees. It was, okay, I'm going to make sure you guys have health benefits and I'm going to offer you guys shares. When it started out, all of the promises that they were making were a lot more genuine because they were coming from Bruce Linton himself. He wanted to make sure everyone had health benefits. He wanted to make sure everyone had vacation days and sick days of paid vacation days and paid sick days. He cared about all of his employees (Mateo, 2022).

So my experience is everybody thought the whole community really, really put a lot into canopy. Everybody did from the coworkers, which everybody was local just to the town itself. I guess like the experience of being there during Bruce Linton's time, you felt that growth and you felt that like the community was just like getting better (Brad Carby, 2022).

The company got a new CEO called David Klein. Then, a couple of months after his arrival, he began to fire people. They called them "justified layoffs", but in fact, they were just layoffs; but since they "fired" us, we could collect unemployment benefits, so we did not end up penniless. Besides, they gave us compensation that was the equivalent of two weeks of salary, something that was also great, but the surprise of being fired after being in the company for two and a half years was really devastating; they did not care, the only thing they cared for was money. And really everything changed when Klein arrived. He treated people as numbers. There was no respect, he was a "man of money"; we are talking about billions of dollars, while we were here earning fifteen dollars per hour, which is not much. The impact that all of this had on me waiting to be fired, because I really hated being there, and I no longer liked it at all after David Klein arrived. Many people were not happy at all (Esperanza, 2022).

On the other hand, the investment of five billion dollars in Canopy Growth by Constellation Brands determined the policy regarding the outline of social responsibility that the company would follow, which probably had its biggest impact in the work place, since, on a reoccurring basis, the hiring and firing of employees became a constant, with various consequences for the workers, their families, and for the community itself and, in this sense, not only were the permanent employees affected by these layoffs, but also the non-permanent ones, those who were hired seasonally, through an agency called Adecco, to carry out activities mainly related with the cutting of the flowers, or trimming, a monotonous work that many people do not wish to do due to the tedium that it entails and because of the low salaries.

These kinds of jobs offered few rights and the daily life in the company of those who performed them was different from that of permanent workers. The “temporaries” were discriminated against and treated as disposable resources, according to the testimonies of the permanent workers. In terms of rigor in regard to their mobility, it was much stricter, and their possibilities much more limited. They could not circulate through several spaces in which workers hired directly by Canopy Growth could. Along these same lines, we spoke with a former full-time worker regarding the discrimination against temporary personnel. Her commentary brings to the table a long-standing problem in the Canadian agroindustry in relation to the discrimination against those hired “seasonally,” those who are usually from the Global South. One could think that the industry of cannabis would stand upon better conditions, but the narratives prove the opposite:

There was an agency called Adecco, which hired personnel. There were maybe ten people at most per day in every shift, and there were three shifts. Many of the employees, my coworkers, did not treat these employees as if they were with us, they treated them as outsiders, as if they had done something bad, they would yell at them and make them go through rough times, and that was not okay. I was not one of them, but there were people who felt intimidated by them, because they were taking the place of someone else who could get in and work full-time (Hortencia, 2022).

Some of the incongruities and lack of transparency in the processes were identified from the moment of recruitment to enter Canopy Growth. Said process evidently had its small divergences in comparison with other companies, and even within the corporation itself there existed some discrepancies.

According to people interviewed, the difference in treatment depended on the ties and recommendations that the applicant had inside the corporation. The previous arguments coincide with the testimonies taken from the Indeed page regarding

favoritism in the company's labor practices and the special considerations that certain people enjoyed as a consequence not of their performance but of the networks they built with the higher-ups.

The massive layoffs were the fundamental point that made evident the contradictions between the narratives of the employees and the hegemonic discourses coined by those responsible for Canopy Growth's communication strategy through their press releases, reports and other dissemination resources regarding their aforementioned corporate social responsibility. The following testimonies touch upon this subject:

Many people entered unemployment processes, many people were subjected to becoming Canopy employees and then were unemployed. There were many people who did their job fantastically and they lost it [the job]. The way they treat their staff at Canopy Growth is not convenient for mental health, besides the fact that it is not socially acceptable that you hire so many people and then you fire them based on corporate standards. They should give other opportunities: housing is expensive, people may end up homeless, they cannot pay for their housing, their house, [and at the same time support] their children. This is not fair for people. I was about to ask for [a job] at Canopy Growth many times, but after seeing in the media and social media that they hired and fired people [I realized] I could not manage the situation of being hired and fired a few months later (Angela, 2022).

The loss of jobs had an impact in the mental health of those who were fired, and also in that of their family. One of the main pressures for parents was the fact that many of the benefits that their children received depended on those jobs. With the layoffs, they suddenly disappeared, leading to a rise of stress and distress in families (Bruno, 2022).

No, what made me angry was the way they did it. They gathered us at 7 am in this room. We thought it would be any other thing, we would have never imagined that we would be laid off after they had told us that our jobs were safe and they suddenly fired us. My supervisor, who was in charge of the Department of Radiations, told me: "don't worry, all of you here are safe" and then less than a week later I was laid off. I was in shock... and they put us in line, next to the table, and if you wanted to get your last check you had to sign a document; we were more or less losing our rights. They threatened us with our last check. So I was so fed up and angry that at one point I just signed and got out as fast as I could (Hortencia, 2022).

Yes, I was afraid of being laid off as my coworkers. And it had an impact on my mental health, because I was absent for a couple of days because the workplace was so unbearable, since they were going through contract changes, things like those in which certainty does not exist. My coworkers were not the kindest since we were all so stressed out. Even I did not know if I would have a job or not the next day, because it could happen at any

time and it was so stressful. I remember that I heard about another management that one day they changed their access codes. Their access did not work, because they did not know they had been fired the previous day. That's how they learned. They just could not get in. And they were told "you cannot come inside" or "let me bring someone to talk with you". That was not okay; that is not the way you fire someone, that's not okay (Mirna, 2022).

Regarding the existing conditions in Canopy Growth in matters of security, mental health, and work payments we were able to recover the following testimonies, which allow us to visualize some of practices related to social responsibility, in which the way to resolve the problems was not exactly the most responsible on the part of the corporation:

I had an accident there. Yes. And it was related to something which I had previously mentioned. And maybe one or two months later they had never fixed it. And it ended up affecting me. Maybe the leader of my team did not tell the right person about it. I don't know. I had to go to the chiropractor and stuff. I was out for one month because of that (Bruno, 2022).

If you're stuck in a room with people screaming and yelling all day, yes, it's extremely psychologically tormenting. That was the main reason I started freaking out in the room. I would have started missing days because I was having panic and anxiety attacks. The panic attacks happened in the room, so I usually ended up having to leave and then suddenly I would leave for the day if I couldn't calm myself down enough to go back into the room. The panic attack or the anxiety attacks were where I didn't feel like going into work today, but this again was after my wife passed away (Mateo, 2022).

With the departure of Bruce Linton and the impacts of the pandemic, certain programs stopped being financed and applied, such as the ones offered at the Information Centre, which was visited by thousands of people, and contributed significantly to the deconstruction of stigma related to cannabis. The support that was planned for the population vanished with the departure of Bruce Linton. Simply put, any type of benefit for the community ceased to exist, beyond the fact that a number of people still had a job at the corporation, without evaluating whether they were satisfied with it.

Regarding the transformations that occurred in Canopy Growth as a result of the dismissal of Bruce Linton, the former director himself commented:

Well, I think, they have had two changes of priorities since I left. The first one was "We are just going to run this better, and we are going to be so profitable." That did not work; they

were telling people guidance. Then, the second was “We are going to cut so much cost that we will be successful.” That will not work either. The company is almost disappearing in terms of its visibility. In American business, it is much more similar to a military structure. The military has a much bigger impact, in my opinion, on America. We do not have a military impact in Canada. In American business, you have a general, and you have a couple of people reporting to them, but it is very much a hierarchy. The general says we are going to make profits and he yells it and he yells it and everybody is supposed to do it, while in Canadian business it is more horizontal. There is no big general. You can have a leader, but you have discussions about three things: we want to make profits someday; we want to be the number one thing that everybody wants to buy, work at, hold shares. Canadian business sees the world as an opportunity that does include American business. American business sees it as an opportunity that must start with America. So, a big shift is always now about when America is ready to do cannabis, but they’re not ready. They’re not going to be ready. In the next five years, they will not be ready (Bruce Linton, 2022).

A worker’s union plays an important role within the group of the stakeholders in the making of the social responsibility of companies, since their role would be to seek and secure the safeguarding of the labor rights of workers in the cannabis industry in Canada, although by law those who work in cultivation and other activities related to agriculture cannot form unions. In this sense, the employees of Canopy Growth expressed their points of view regarding the possibility of creating a union:

They were actively squashing it. They were actively crushing the idea of a union there. I don’t know exactly why internally they would want, like not wanting us to have a union. I knew it had something to do with the benefits or something surrounding that because they had essentially said or, and something could possibly do with everybody having a salary or something too. Like we might have to go to an hourly wage and our benefits, we would have to pay for something. They were telling us anything to steer us away from union like actively because there were many times there were even during Bruce Linton’s time as a CEO, where everything was fantastic, where people were still like, We should form a union, and we all looked into it. But at the end of the day, when you don’t have enough people supporting that, you know you can’t do it (Bruno, 2022).

The creation of a union does not consider it possible because he thinks that the company would not allow something like that, if someone tries to create unions they would go to Mexico or other countries. Before they will fire those who try to generate the union (Mateo, 2022).

We did not have a union, I wish we had one, I think that many other comrades would still work there if a union had existed or someone who had their back (Hortencia, 2022).



Canopy Growth, Smiths Falls, Ontario. Photo: Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo

CONCLUSIONS

As we were able to observe throughout this article, there exist several contradictions between the discourse that Canopy Growth has been in charge of disseminating in different means of media and the testimonies of the people who worked in the corporation, especially after the ousting of its founder Bruce Linton. The research reflected that the practices regarding the social responsibility of the corporation were modified when the CEO changed. Bruce Linton's vision adhered more in practice to the values promoted by the concept of social responsibility, while the practices implemented after the entry of CEO David Klain differed greatly between discourse and its application. This was made more evident after the massive layoffs of workers which began in 2020, reaching their maximum level in February of 2023, under the argument that said strategy was a "key piece of the cost-cutting plan." By contrasting the hegemonic narratives of the corporation with that of the grassroots', we observe how the social responsibility that the company currently promotes remains at a rhetorical level, with a vision of social responsibility that is quite weak, disjointed, and without any commitment to carry out significant transformations in search of social improvement. Canopy Growth, like many other corporations, demonstrates through its actions that the profit factor is far above the common good, and as long as there are no transparent mechanisms that evaluate in a critical manner the actions of corporations and binding laws that punish the abuses perpetuated by these, the concept of corporative social responsibility in emerging or consolidated industries will continue to be one more tool of the capitalist system to continue with the degradation of the planet.

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