Elizabeth Horihan

Modes of Inquiry: *Bottlemania* paper

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Water Sale: ethical business or a scam?

Water, it seems to be just about everywhere. It comes from sinks, fills community pools, sparkles in lakes and rivers, and leaves cities looking like lakes after hurricanes and floods. Yet clean drinkable water is scarce. It is always one of the first necessities to run out during a disaster. In some parts of the world the lack of water even creates its own disaster. Ben Franklin said, “When the well runs dry we shall know the value of water” (qtd. in Royte 72). Already, areas of the United States are watching their “wells run dry”, suffering from droughts and water shortages: why should some companies earn large profits from its sale? It is unethical to earn exponential profits, like those of bottled water companies, with a little or no work to obtain an end product. A consensus of regulatory standards must be developed to address the questions, ethics, dilemmas, and future effects of the bottled water companies

The vast majority of companies earn a profit, which is by no means a negative attribute. What sets the profits of some companies in the unethical category is how the profits are obtained. But what does it mean for something to be ethical? The term ethical can be explained as a “standards of behavior that tell us how human beings ought to act in the many situations in which they find themselves” (“A Framework For Thinking Ethically”1). In correspondence with this explanation, a few examples of unethical manners in which to earn a profit are: earning unnecessarily large profits from a product, earning profits by deceiving the consumer, or showing disregard for the environment or those affected by their business. The manner in which the bottled water company goes about the manufacture and sale of bottled water questions its ethical value to society.

The bottled water company spends huge sums of money to convince the consumer that their product is worth buying. Their main competitor, other than other bottled water companies, is tap water. Price-wise, there is no comparison between the two, with tap water costing approximately $.002 a gallon and 16 oz. of bottled water costing $1.50 ("Break the Bottled Water Habit | Cost Calculator"1). The companies must therefore convince the consumer that bottled water offers a higher quality product than the tap water company. How do they create this illusion? They place labels with pictures that imply the water came from a mountain spring or a lush forest. In all actuality the water may have come out of a tap several states away. Companies such as Poland Spring purchase tap water from companies such as Pure Mountain Springs to sell to their consumers raising the price each time the water changes hands.(Royte 11) Tap water has a history of being of poor quality, but tap water companies have put huge amounts of time and money into making their water safe. However this history, along with society’s desire to have personal, portable, and convenient access to water provides more incentive for consumers to make the switch to the more costly bottled water. Illness due to, or unhealthy levels of contaminants in tap water result in heightened public awareness since tap water is regulated by the EPA and the findings from water quality tests must be made available to the public. On the other hand, bottled water’s track record, while apparently relatively clear in comparison to that of tap water, is spotted with numerous recalls. These recalls, according to Worldwatch Institution, don’t appear until several months after the product has been on sale. Also, the reports on water quality are self-reported and optional. (Royte 146,147) Therefore, it appears bottled water companies may have an easier time keeping problems with their product under wraps and out of public knowledge. This differing in testing and reporting procedures provides a large advantage for the bottled water companies over the tap water companies, and allows for the deception of the consumer on the purity of the product they are purchasing from a bottled water manufacturer. The unethical behavior that overshadows much of the bottled water industry does not end with the manner in which information is provided, or not provided, to the public or with the high profit margin on the end product. The behavior in which some water companies act in regards to the environment and communities affected by the assembly of bottles of water is also unethical. The community of Fryeburg is one that appears frequently in *Bottlemania* as a victim of Nestlé. Nestlé, like many other drink manufacturers, wants to lay claim to more water. While companies claim to conduct thorough investigations on the effect of the removal of large amounts of water from aquifers like the one in Fryeburg, it is hard to judge the true long term effects. Stefan Jackson stated in regards to the testing conducted on Fryeburg’s aquifer:

Poland Spring says their pumping will have no impact. That’s ludicrous. Every action in this ecosystem has an impact. But is it measurable or significant? It’s no impact because of what they chose to measure. As far as I know, they did no dragon-fly population study, no sinkhole study, they didn’t do broad macro-invertebrate studies. They looked at the hydrology but they didn’t do environmental impact surveys. (qtd. in Royte 56)

The bottled water industry does not look at anything beyond what they are interested in. Their product does not depend on the presence of dragon-flies or rare species of fish, their main concern is if the water will be there.

The communities that live by and rely on the aquifers that water companies covet are then left to defend their valuable supply. Some of these communities are more successful than others. Most often though, by the time citizens realize the damage a bottled water company’s activities could create, they are left to fight a losing battle, both in court and within their own community. Bottled water companies allow communities to think they will have a choice in whether or not their water supply is pumped into tanker trucks and sent off, but in all actuality, when refused the water company most often takes legal action to secure their claim on the water. In some cases the relationship between the community and the water company appear to be symbiotic with the water company providing jobs and the community providing water. However, these jobs are to satisfy the community by leaving something other than the absence of water and the presence of hundreds of tanker trucks. (Royte 68) When the water supply declines, the jobs will be gone, leaving a community with unemployed citizens who need to find water. In other cases like Fryeburg, the bottled water companies pump water out of the aquifer and then truck it out of the city. When the citizens try and fight the company, they are faced with top notch lawyers arguing that the pumping will not harm anyone, and if the pumping and transportation of water does not continue it will cause a hardship (188). Where though would this hardship exist? The vast majority of the bottled water produced is not going to areas where drinkable water can no longer be gained by turning on a faucet due to disaster or other reasons. Of course the argument could be made that local economies would suffer from the job loss that would occur if bottled water companies closed, but those jobs would most likely be lost anyway if the water began to run out.

Companies claim “hardship” would exist for those profiting from the sale of bottled water and, of course, the loyal consumers. These consumers are just as much to blame for the unethical behavior of the water companies as the companies themselves. Why? If consumers did not purchase the overpriced bottled water and instead drank directly from the tap or filtered their own tap water, the bottled water industry would not have a demand to supplement their product. Therefore, Americans in their need for convenience and sanitation have turned what was once considered a luxury, access to drinkable water in their homes, into something to be feared and avoided (Royte 42). However, this aversion seems unwarranted now with the constant testing of tap water to ensure safety and with taste test results proving there is hardly a difference between tap and bottled water.

The sale of water in itself is not unethical. When water is sold at unnecessarily high prices to maximize profit and the environment and citizens near the source of the water are manipulated so that others can enjoy an unnecessary luxury it is unethical. However, the blame for the disreputable behavior of these companies does not just rest with the companies. It rests with the consumers who provide the demand to fuel further production. Wells are running dry and the value of water is being unnecessarily driven up by greed driven companies feeding on America’s call for a luxury that comes at much too high a cost. The behavior of these companies is unethical and too many consumers are rewarding it with profit.

Works Cited

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