

SEVEN

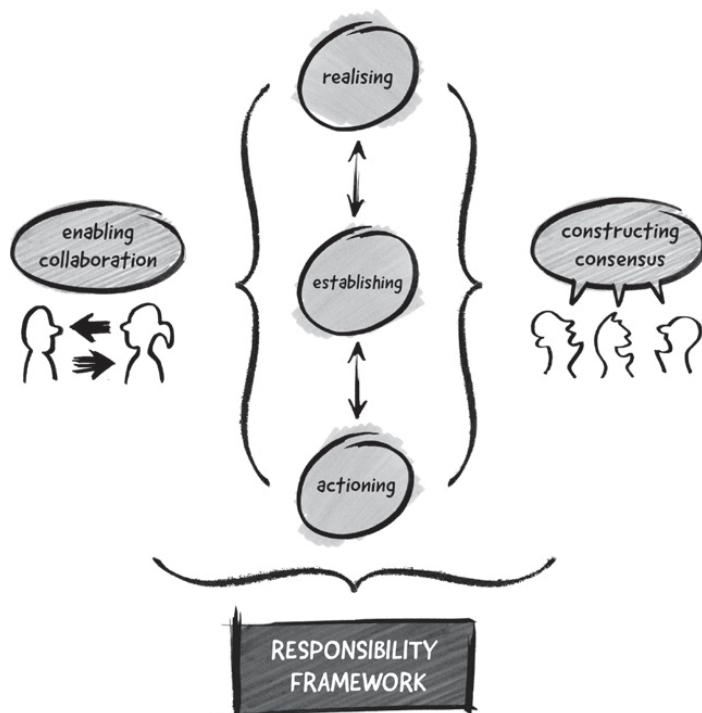
Five Understandings

Introduction

We conclude this book with a concise summary of some of the understandings that our work generates and a discussion about how these understandings might lead to actions. Our work has emphasised that responsibilities in a digitally mediated environment are reciprocal and relational. It is also a form of responsibility that is multi-dimensional and pluralistic. Each case study shows some of the ways in which contemporary public policy often overlooks this form of responsibility, diminishing the effectiveness of the policy and making vulnerable those the policy seeks to benefit. Each case study also shows how technology is used to enforce responsible actions without recognising the multifaceted nature of digital responsibilities. Each case study illustrates how community actions do the relational and reflexive work necessary to realise and establish responsibilities and in so doing, reframe the use of technology to one of enabling responsibility actions. It is through these case studies that we see many of the ways that positive, enabling approaches to digital responsibilities are fundamental to a digitally democratic society.

These contentions are represented in a high-level view of our framework (see [Figure 7.1](#)) that highlights the bases of enabling collaboration and constructing consensus that are vital to understanding its relational components and aspects.

Figure 7.1: The relational aspects of our digital responsibilities framework



Five understandings

Chapter 1 noted that the RISCS digital responsibility fellowship began with a series of consultations with academic and practitioner communities about what the term ‘digital responsibility’ meant to them and how the notion of responsibility is shaped by digital technology. The consultations yielded varied, and sometimes conflicted, responses. Nevertheless, a clearer picture of digital responsibilities emerged which eventually crystallised to form our framework. We now put forward five understandings to form the basis

of a manifesto that seeks to make conversations about digital responsibilities central to the co-construction of digital policy interactions across time and space.

Understanding the digital is about real relationships

Responsibility can only ever be partially encoded in the design of digital technology and the formulation of law and regulation that frame its design and operation. Our case studies demonstrate that digital responsibilities are also formed through relationships and are negotiated consistently. A focus on relationships is necessary to realise, establish and action responsible use of digital technologies. However, frameworks that seek to encode responsibilities into digital artefacts by themselves, without considering the relationships involved in design and use, will not ensure responsible uses. It is acknowledging the relational dimension of digital responsibilities that enables implementation actions to be adjusted in line with the capabilities and resources of parties. Understanding digital policy implementation thus means identifying and accepting the complexity of digital and physical environments and the relationships that co-exist within them.

Understanding digital impact at scale

Digital technologies re-shape responsibilities in part through their ability to create impact at scale. At the click of a mouse, digital technologies can create impacts that are felt by many over both time and space. This can have the effect of disconnecting the realisation of digital responsibilities from their establishment and from their actioning. Potential dislocation over time and space is another reason why ascribing responsibility into digital technologies is insufficient because implementation impacts are constantly evolving. As the implementation of digital technologies are further honed for scalability and efficiency, potential impacts are further distributed and the allocation

of responsibilities become more amorphous. The scale of potential digital impact means that digital responsibilities must be considered holistically, broadly and relationally to ensure that all relevant conversations are considered and enacted.

Understanding that we can't have speed and responsibility

The implementation of digital technologies enables impact at speed, as well as scale. Responsibilities that cannot be encoded into digital technologies impede speed. This raises the especially important question of whether you can have both speed and digital responsibilities formation at the same time. Our case studies indicate that at some point, time and care must be taken by all actors involved in digital policy implementation to converse about which responsibilities should lie where. Our case studies also show that such conversations were largely regarded as a sink cost to be avoided by both policy makers and digital technology manufacturers. Our digital responsibility framework makes visible the conversational work required to generate consensus and acknowledges the efforts of different actors to take the time to have essential responsibility conversations. The conversations are essential to ensure that digital policy implementation is safe and more resilient, which require care, time and patience. Our work then suggests that speed and the processes of responsibility formation are not natural partners.

Understanding responsibility frameworks differently

In contemporary society, diverse groups will understand digital responsibilities in different ways. Hence our framework is a way of thinking about collective actions across different groups and is an intervention to change the conversation about digital responsibilities. The framework offers a means of scaffolding conversations about responsibility in a way that gives structure to a complex, and often contested, topic. From these conversations, groups can start to advocate for certain

responsibilities to be actioned and create guidance on how to do it. Our framework is therefore as a means of framing conversations that brings together diverse understandings of digital responsibility rather than being based on the needs and perspectives of one group.

Our framework is developed from the viewpoint that responsibility lacunas will always exist. The temporal and scalar dimensions to digital responsibility are such that there will always be dislocations between realising, establishing and actioning digital responsibilities and these dislocations will give rise to absences and silences. At the same time, the power imbalances between the different stakeholders will also lead to dissensus on where responsibilities lie. Consequently, conversations about digital responsibilities will need to take place at the local as well as the distributed levels, and the framework is designed to support conversations at both scales. All of this means that digital responsibilities need to be considered differently to the traditional approaches of blameworthy ascriptions. Digital responsibilities require consensus, negotiation and collaboration processes which require us to rethink how responsibility has traditionally been conceptualised and ascribed.

Understanding that digital responsibility is pluralistic

Just as digital technologies support distinct types of practice, digital responsibilities can be enacted in many ways. This plurality requires that there be consensus about how digital responsibilities are enacted and about which responsibilities are realised and established. The realisation of digital responsibilities might emerge in one site but equally it could emerge in another. Similarly, establishment could be driven from one realm or equally another. Different actions take place using multiple actors in many different environments. The notion of digital responsibilities is thus deeply pluralistic because it's inherently relational, distributed and fractal, because each of the three processes interact with each other across sites, realms

and environments. Hence the need for the plural conversations outlined throughout the book.

Conclusion – understanding that it's different now

In conclusion, we contend that these five understandings shed light on why digital responsibilities are different to the traditional conceptualisations of responsibility. They also make the case for why a relational response to digital responsibilities is needed. These understandings motivate our digital responsibilities framework and shape its intended use.

At the heart of our understandings is the need for multiple, plural and collaborative conversations that are spread over time and space to achieve consensus about digital technology implementation and use. Our understandings have developed over years of thinking and coalesced through writing in 2025. When we started our journey into digital responsibilities, we did not anticipate an unfolding world in which the recognition of plurality, the beneficial acknowledgement of collaboration and the acceptance of consensus as a core democratic function would all be under threat. Yet here we find ourselves.

We appear to be beginning a time where the state use of executive authority is starting to challenge the established democratic order of the second half of the 20th Century. We are also at a time where the power of the largest technology companies is concentrating and becoming increasingly implicated in the use of executive authority. The book's case studies highlight the limits of forcing functions, whether they be in law, or built as security controls in technology. These limits only emanate from the diffuse values and needs of the different sites outlined in [Chapter 2](#), namely, the state, the market and the individual. Responsibilities, including digital responsibilities, will always be contentious as long as the values and needs of the state and the market remain separate, even in societies governed by privatisation or marketisation policies. Should those values and needs be conjoined, then the ability

to forcibly ascribe responsibilities on individuals through digital technologies, predicated on responsabilisation strategies, will increase manifestly.

We end our book then with this message.

The world is indeed different now to when we started this work. We started understanding digital responsibilities to better assist with the implementation of digital policy strategies so all parties could collaborate conversationally for the betterment of all. We still believe that it is essential to understand the varied and complex responsibilities that arise and which are distributed over time, location and space due to digital technology. The distributed nature of digital responsibility formation is itself a protection. Our digitally mediated worlds are expansive, messy and everywhere. Understanding digital responsibilities therefore becomes vital to better see the underlying benefits and dangers of digital-by-default societies, especially at a time when the foundations of governmental and technology architectures are changing rapidly. Going back to Peter Cane in [Chapter 2](#), understanding who we are responsible to, as well as what we are responsible for, has never been more important than it is now, especially in the digital context. Truly understanding digital responsibilities, therefore, is as much grounded in the physical world as it is in the digital one.