



Responsibility: Its Social Construction, Attribution, Measurability, and Consequences in an Increasingly Virtual World

Call for Project Ideas, Papers, and Symposia

Extended Submission Deadline: February 11, 2015

Organizing Team¹: Stefan Bauernschuster, Ludger van Gisteren, Michael Grimm, Harry Haupt, Carolin Häussler, Andreas König, Rüdiger Korff, Hans Krahe, Ulrike Müßig, Ilia Polian, Malte Rehbein, and Jan Hendrik Schumann

November 17, 2014

Introduction

The *Forschungswerkstatt* (research workshop) aims to spark collaborative, discipline-spanning research at the University of Passau. The basic idea behind the *Forschungswerkstatt* is that our university, in collaboration with our national and international partners, has a unique potential to engage in landmark projects that will not only make significant contributions to numerous important scholarly conversations but also help sharpen our profile as a leading scientific institution.

Over the last 12 months, a group of roughly 35 colleagues have gathered in a series of meetings in order to generate a set of general directions for joint research. We have now arrived at a point where we can begin to develop each of our general ideas into more concrete outlines for larger projects of various formats. To support our endeavors, the University of Passau will sponsor topic-focused workshops, which we will use to share ideas about particular projects—including topic-specific papers—and to make plans for joining those projects into a wider, cross-disciplinary research agenda.

In this call for project ideas and papers, we ask researchers at our university to submit their ideas for the first workshop in this series. The workshop will focus on the topic of “Responsibility: Its Social Construction, Attribution, Measurability, and Consequences in an Increasingly Virtual World.” We would be extremely pleased to receive many outlines of thought-provoking projects and papers, which we will then review and assemble into a one-and-a-half-day workshop at Schloss Neuburg in Neuburg am Inn on March 5 and 6, 2015.

¹ In alphabetic order.

Overview

Across the world, individuals, organizations, and societies are finding themselves substantially affected by path-breaking, often technology-induced, shifts. Science is also fundamentally changing as it seeks new opportunities triggered by these radical changes. For instance, digital humanities is emerging as a methodological and theoretical fundus that many view as a facilitator and informant to a host of other disciplines such as philology, philosophy, sociology, and law. Without doubt, many within and outside the scientific community portray recent technological advances—especially new ways of collecting and analyzing “Big Data”—as a path to addressing numerous “grand challenges.”

Nevertheless, scholarly conversations in all disciplines are increasingly shifting their focus away from the upsides of new, mostly IT-related, technologies and the changes that they trigger, and instead are beginning to address the flip-side, or costs, of such innovations. Perhaps one of the most startling phenomena in this context is the *evaporation or de-localization of responsibility*: today’s technological leaps blur institutional, perceptual, and organizational boundaries to such an extent that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attribute responsibility for certain activities to specific individuals or organizations. For instance, car drivers are handing over responsibility to (semi-)automatic machines, even though the legal responsibility in the case of an accident has not yet been clarified. Similarly, people use information from Internet sources that are not always able or likely to sign responsible for the quality of the information. Moreover, actors in all types of domains, including such critical domains as warfare, are becoming increasingly distant from the consequences of their actions.

With the de-localization of responsibility, fundamental questions arise, particularly with regard to three interrelated issues: (1) the social construction and semantic representation of responsibility; (2) the problem of responsibility attribution; and (3) the measurability of perceptions of responsibility and responsible behavior. These three issues in interaction could induce critical changes in individual and collective behavior, institutions, and, ultimately, in society.

Social construction of responsibility. Perhaps the foremost, because ontological, question in the evolving context of responsibility is how individuals and collectives socially construct responsibility. What do people mean today when they use the term “responsibility,” as reflected, for instance, in the metaphors they use to frame the concept? How does the virtualization of communication, interaction, and knowledge generation alter conceptualizations of responsibility? How do these perceptual changes co-evolve with morphing perceptions and realizations of collectivity and individuality?

The problem of responsibility attribution. On a more behavioral level, we find other key questions: Who takes responsibility in a virtualized world? Who in that universe can be held accountable for various activities? Consider, for instance, the increasing tensions between the centralization of data storage and (economic) power on the one hand (e.g., Google, Amazon, and Facebook) and the decentralization of data generation on the other hand. If knowledge is created by a collective of individual natural persons rather than organized legal persons, who can be held responsible? How do those contributors feel about and enact their responsibility? Other exemplary questions that scholars have only begun to tackle emerge around the topic of death and the Internet. For example, who “owns” a person’s Internet-published content (e.g., blogs or Facebook entries) after that person has perished? Who can legitimately claim that the data generated by or about a person who is deceased needs to be erased? Who can be held responsible for ensuring that this data is removed? Questions also arise in the context of academic and non-academic work. For instance, is it possible to not only ascribe responsibility to naturally

identifiable persons but also to groups or even to group dynamics? Can and should responsibility be attributed to systems, as has been discussed in some academic disciplines?

The measurability of responsibility and responsible behavior. Closely related to the issue of responsibility attribution, although more empirical in nature, is the challenge of gauging peoples' enactment of responsibility. For instance, an increasing amount of knowledge is generated by teams rather than individuals. While mega projects, such as those at CERN, are the extreme, the average number of individuals in scientific and inventor teams has increased significantly in recent years, primarily in a quest to manage the vast expansion of knowledge. However, as team size grows, the difficulty of precisely measuring responsibility and attributing it to individual team members also exacerbates. This is particularly true because sub-tasks are highly interconnected and because significant scientific contributions typically occur randomly, sometimes in interaction, and often in the virtual space or in multiple places at one time. This challenge becomes more pressing the more societies desire to track people's compliance with legitimate standards of conduct.

Critical changes potentially caused by responsibility shifts. The three issues of constructing, attributing, and measuring responsibility affect nearly all areas of social life and scientific work:

- Humanities: To what extent are individual freedom and autonomy increasingly constrained by the same technologies that are supposed to free the individual from physical and cognitive restrictions?
- Law and business: How can organizations and policy makers control the increasing business risks that stem from the de-localization of responsibility?
- Decision making: If we exclude chaotic, discovery-driven, and less intentional (i.e., algorithmic) methods of problem solving, do we inherently lose serendipity as a catalyst for productive problem solutions?
- Social psychology and sociology: How will people's perceptions of their selves, their social identities, and their behaviors change if they are unable to determine whether they are interacting with other human beings or machines? Will they perceive a "Kafkaesque" or "Orwellian" alienation?
- Leadership: How do organizational and political leaders adapt to changes in conceptualizations of responsibility? How do they (need to) change the ways in which they make sense of and give sense to responsibility-related information?
- Marketing: Who is accountable if responsibility is shifted from the producer (organizations) to the consumer (individuals) as in, for example, sharing economies characterized by such businesses as AirBnB and Uber, and in contexts of open knowledge sharing, such as Wikipedia? How do businesses and customers manage the increasing empowerment of customers (e.g., in banking)?
- Epistemology and statistics: Across all of these areas, an immediate consequence is the emergence of a wide range of partially interrelated and overlapping information, which results in complex and heterogeneous arrays of data. If we could understand the world and society pragmatically rather than through a theory-driven approach and predict phenomena merely by extrapolating patterns from such data, how would ontological and epistemological positions, including the normative foundations of our scholarly profession, be affected? How can we single out factors and take causality issues into account?
- Technology development: How could responsibility requirements to technical artifacts be formulated and enforced during the design of potentially critical systems? How can technology enable or enhance the enforcement of legal and normative objectives? How do developers, individually and collectively, enact responsibility when designing new equipment—particularly, if this equipment could have a responsibility-related impact?

Projects, Papers, and Symposia

Our goal is to use the University of Passau as a launchpad and hub for the description and analysis of focal issues emerging in the context of responsibility. To encourage idea generation, to create a network, to agree on specific plans, and to proliferate your thinking, we invite you to submit your ideas for larger projects, specific papers, symposia, and other creative formats that are related to the topics described in the overview above. We plan to combine all submissions into one workshop, which will be held at and funded by the University of Passau in late February or early March 2015.

We see many promising avenues for projects, idea-generating symposia or workshops, and concrete (interdisciplinary) papers that focus on crucial tensions that co-emerge with the ongoing technical and societal changes, such as autonomy/freedom and determinism/constraint, pragmatic and intentional search, centrality and de-centrality, global and local, and formal and informal.

Please summarize your ideas in a short abstract (two to five pages), or as a collection of abstracts that list the contributors and your (international) partners. Describe your goals and targeted outcomes, and your plan for moving forward. We ask that you place particular emphasis on the type of contribution you wish to make as a team, and indicate the conversations to which you aim to contribute. Moreover, please highlight how your plan fits into the overall topic of this call and why your project would be best positioned at the University of Passau. We are open to a wide array of contributions, regardless of whether they are of theoretical or empirical nature, and we are open to any accompanying ideas, for instance, regarding workshop formats and types of collaboration.

Due Date for Submissions and the Review Process

As agreed by the *Forschungswerkstatt*, original submissions must be written in English and are due by January 31, 2015. They should be submitted electronically to Ilonka Weinberger (ilonka.weinberger@uni-passau.de). Early submissions are encouraged. We will ask at least two reviewers to comment on each proposal.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact any one of us.