



The Social Responsibility in the Information Age is to Maximise Profits—Is it?

Bernd Carsten Stahl

University College Dublin, Department of Management Information Systems, Ireland
Tel: +353 1 716 8340, Fax: +353 1 716 1120, Bernd.Stahl@ucd.ie

ABSTRACT

Social responsibility is a highly popular term and it seems to be of importance to what is happening in the information age. In this paper the notion of social responsibility is analysed and its relationship to the information age is discussed. The result is that while the term social responsibility may make sense, it is imperative to clarify its definition before drawing any further conclusions from it. On this condition, talking about social responsibility can be helpful in expressing some of the normative questions of the information age. If a clear definition is lacking, however, it might be a better idea to forget about the term rather than come to a counterintuitive conclusion as the one hinted at in the title of the paper, namely that it is an expression of social responsibility to maximise profits.

INTRODUCTION

In one of the best-known and most discussed articles about the topic of social responsibility Milton Friedman (1970) argues that it is the social responsibility of the business to increase its profits. His argument is that a functioning market will lead to optimal allocation of resources and to the maximisation of well-being. So, in effect, what business does is morally responsible anyway and if we just let people do their job without interfering on the grounds of some misunderstood morality then everything turns out for the best.

This is an extreme example for a view on social responsibility that is certainly not universally recognised but that until this day is frequently discussed. The example is useful because it shows that the term itself is neither clear nor unequivocal. Different authors think of different things when they talk about social responsibility and it is far from clear whether the term is really meaningful. The purpose of this paper will therefore be to shed some light on the concept of social responsibility and to discuss which impact the information age might have on it. For this purpose I will begin with a brief discussion of the concept of responsibility and analyse how it changes if the attribute “social” is added. From there I will proceed to see how information technology or computers change this concept, enlarge or decrease the scope and scale of it and what social responsibility in the information age might mean. In doing this I hope to prove that the term “social responsibility in the information age” is not at all a trivial one. In order to make sense of it researchers will have to be careful in how they define it.

RESPONSIBILITY

In order to find out what the meaning of social responsibility in the information age might be I will first look at the definition of responsibility and in a next step discuss what the specific properties of social responsibility are.

A Definition of Responsibility

Due to space restraints I will not be able to offer a detailed discussion of the concept of responsibility.¹ In the most general sense, responsibility is a process of ascription. The purpose is to ascribe an object to a subject. The subject is what is named as the answer to the question: “who is responsible?”, the object answers the question “what is the subject responsible for?” So, if I say “you are responsible for the accident” then I ascribe the accident (object) to you (subject). This ascription process is usually a social one and it involves more than just a subject and an object. There needs to be some kind of authority or instance to decide about the outcome of the imputation. In the case of legal responsibility, for example, this instance is the judge. The entire process is based on communication and it needs some sort of generally agreed upon normative background. These underlying norms can be

social morality, the law, or any other set of rules that the affected parties can agree upon.

What is important to remember when we talk about responsibility is that it is a social construct. There is no such thing as natural or universal responsibility. Every instance of responsibility is a social agreement that includes several parties and is thus subject to potential criticism by everybody involved. Responsibility ascriptions can only claim validity when there is at least a great majority of those affected who agree that it is legitimates. Furthermore, responsibility is never a neutral and purely descriptive category since it always involves some kind of accusation, defence, differing perceptions of realities and rules and a final decision.

Another fact of importance is that responsibility has a purpose. It is mostly used to ascribe some sort of sanction, be they positive in the form of a reward or negative in the form of punishment. In legal as well as in moral responsibility the negative side, the punishment is generally in the centre of attention. The imposition of punishments usually follows some higher purpose which tends to be the greater good, the facilitation and improvement of social existence. Whether the judge sentences the accused or public opinion holds a politician responsible, this is motivated by hope that it will make life better in the long run. Responsibility is thus, independent of its specific type, constellation, and realisation, a moral notion. If this is a general description of responsibility, then the next question is what defines social responsibility.

Social Responsibility

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, “social” means - among other things - “of or having to do with human beings in their living together”. Following the description given above one can see that responsibility is a social process. All responsibility ascriptions are social by definition and therefore the term “social responsibility” is a tautology and redundant. When people speak of social responsibility, however, they presumably want to say something that is not redundant and it is therefore worth asking what the “social” might mean. In order to find an answer to this question it is helpful to go back to the definition and see which parts of it could be social or might warrant the distinction between individual and social.

Potentially social in responsibility ascriptions are all three of the basic dimensions, the subject, the object, and the instance or authority. The usual subject of responsibility is the individual, the person. A person is someone who fulfils all of the conditions of being ascribed responsibility. She is adult, mentally and physically healthy, aware of her surroundings, acting intentionally, etc. This is the ideal case in which most philosophers admit that an ascription of responsibility might make sense. The problem of the person as the subject of responsibility is that in many of the relevant cases, there are no individuals who can justifiably be said to be the subject and thus responsible for a

result. In the modern world governments, societies, companies, organisations of all forms and sorts are making many if not most decisions. There is no single individual who is responsible for technological catastrophes like Chernobyl, there is no-one who is personally responsible for global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer, and social developments such as globalisation or the development of the Internet and e-commerce can also not be ascribed to one single person. Therefore some authors have tried to broaden the concept of responsibility to permit collective subjects. These attempts are centred on medium-sized organisations that have certain characteristics such as an internal decision structure, a clear organisational boundary, clearly defined objectives and so forth. Several authors have come to the conclusions that such entities might be considered legitimate subjects of responsibility (cf. French 1972, 1979; Werhane 1985).² In this area we nowadays find increasing discussions about questions like corporate citizenship and other questions of how collective responsibility in the meso-level of the organisation might lead to results.

Another way of describing a genuine sort of social responsibility is looking at the instance. Depending on the sort of responsibility, it can be quite complicated to figure out who or what is considered as the instance. In the case of legal responsibility the instance is clear; it is the judge. For moral questions this is much less clear. One can hear suggestions ranging from God to conscience and, pertaining to our question, one possible instance is society. In a way society is probably the instance in most cases that lead to clear results. When a judge sentences a perpetrator she does so in the name of the people. When a politician has to accept the responsibility for some occurrence he does so before the people. Even when we say that our neighbour is responsible for the dirt in our driveway we refer to social rules and standards that are grounded in socially developed norms. In this sense all responsibility contains a reference to society and again social responsibility is nothing special.

Most people who talk about social responsibility probably associate something concerning the object of responsibility. Social responsibility can then mean that one is either responsible for society or parts of it or that one is responsible with regard to society. Examples of social responsibility in this sense might be the president who is responsible for his subjects, the teacher who is responsible for the pupils in her class or the engineer who is responsible for the safety of the bridge, given that members of society will use it. Of course the three dimensions are linked in practice and the social aspect of all of them interact. If the engineer is responsible for the safety of the bridge in the face of society then this means that he may eventually be judged and punished by society if he does not discharge his responsibility according to social expectations.

What we have seen so far is that social responsibility can have many meanings and the next question will therefore be what, if anything, is special about it in the information age.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Information technology has several points of impact on responsibility in general which I will discuss in the first part of this section. In the second part I will then analyse whether any of these points are relevant in the case of social responsibility and what those consequences might be.

Responsibility and Information Technology

Information technology (IT) brings about changes in the way we perceive and realise responsibility. Some of these changes are clear-cut and obvious. Responsibility is, as was mentioned before, a social process during which an object is ascribed to a subject. This process is based on communication, which offers the first link to IT. The increase of potential scale and scope of communication and information is a precondition for a potential expansion of responsibility. Each user of IT in general and of the Internet in particular has the opportunity to

communicate about topics that he or she is interested in, to create special interest groups, to discuss topics of all sorts with fewer time and space restraints than ever before. We are therefore free to realise responsibility ascriptions concerning questions that would have been unavailable before. On the other hand, responsibility may change the nature of communication. It can blend out parts of it and it may distort what we perceive. It can even lead to a perception of man as a machine with subsequent results for the necessity of morality and thus for the necessity of responsibility.³

Computers might be considered subjects or instances of responsibility. As subjects they would be held responsible (a difficult idea that I cannot discuss here, cf. Stahl 2001). As instances they would decide about who is wrong or right (another philosophically contentious thought which I do not have the space to discuss).

The most widely discussed aspect of IT and responsibility, however, is the results IT produces, thus IT as an object of responsibility. IT changes the way we work and live, the way we communicate and perceive reality and ourselves. These changes deeply affect our communities, our norms and morals and they are thus objects of responsibility ascriptions. The entire field of computer ethics revolves around these questions and offers detailed discussions of questions like power and IT, problems of privacy, accuracy of data, intellectual property, problems of access, hacking, computer fraud etc. The question that will now need to be discussed in the last paragraph is the combination of all the problems named so far:

What is the Social Aspect of Responsibility in the Information Age?

Since I am not the first one to think about this question it may be helpful to look at the pertinent literature and indeed one can find that there is an organisation calling itself "Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility" (CPSR). This organisation, however, seems to have a narrow idea of what social responsibility in relation to information technology might be about. When the director of CPSR says during a speech before the American congress that his organisation emphasises "individual accountability as the cornerstone of computer ethics" (Rotenberg 1995, 136) then this indicates a somewhat limited idea of the problems in question.

In order to come closer to what social responsibility in the information age might really mean, I will combine what was said so far about social responsibility on the one hand and responsibility and IT on the other hand. The purpose of this is to see which meanings the term "social responsibility in the information age" might have. The most promising approach to go about this is to work along the lines of the major dimension and see how they are affected.

Let me start with the subject. Social responsibility understood as collective responsibility as described in the first part of this paper is clearly related to modern organisational forms and these are in turn often based on technologies, especially IT. Computers and IT allow for new ways of interacting and communicating and therefore they can facilitate the emergence of collectives as subjects. The obvious example for this is the corporation. IT helps the construction of this entity called the corporation and therefore it helps making it a subject of responsibility. However, the use of IT brings about a change in organisations that are constituted faster than ever before. One can find discussions of this phenomenon under the heading of "virtual organisation". If one admits the corporation as a subject of quasi-moral responsibility, as I have suggested elsewhere (cf. Stahl 2000), then the question is: do we also admit virtual communities, corporations, or organisations?

Another problem in regard to the subject of responsibility is whether there is something like a collective subject consisting of the users of IT. Are for example all of the "netizens" responsible for the changes that happen in their name and allegedly in their interest? It can be argued that the Internet changes not only the way we communicate but also the way we do business, the way we educate ourselves and many more (cf. Schiller 1999). These developments are of high

moral relevance and we have to ask whether this might be a case of social responsibility as collective responsibility.

The next instance where one might talk of social responsibility is where a social entity is the object of responsibility. As mentioned before, one can be responsible for one's children, for the pupils in one's class, for one's colleagues, for the members of a given society of for humanity. These are mostly examples of role responsibility, since the parent is responsible for her children, the teacher for the pupils, the president for his people, and nobody (apparently) for humanity. Of course one can also feel responsibility for social beings outside of one's roles. How does this change in the information age? Again the most important impact is that many of us have more information than ever before and thus more ways of being aware of possible responsibilities. We may also find new ways of discharging our responsibilities in the information society. The American President's response to the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington was first of all the use of mass media to communicate with the American people. This was certainly a typical if drastic example of social responsibility in the information age.

Finally, the social entity may act as the instance or authority of responsibility. We can be responsible in the face of a social group. This social group can be the basis of the moral norms that underlie the responsibility ascription and it can determine the sanctions that are the result of responsibility. This is what I believe to be the most commonly found example of social responsibility discussed in the literature. When an author speaks of social responsibility he or she often implies that the responsibility ascription in question is social because it happens in public. What happens to this in the information age? Obviously we again have to take into account the multiplicity of information channels. Due to information technology a huge number of acts and their results are perceived in the public realm and can thus be called social.

The three dimensions and their impacts on social responsibility are of course not neatly divided but they can be combined at will. One can for example imagine a case where, say, the computer programmers are held responsible for the Internet users in the face of society that can follow their acts on TV. This would be a case where we have responsibility has several links to social beings and to the information age at the same time. But where does all of this lead us?

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to analyse what social responsibility might mean and how it changes in the context of the information age. The result of this analysis is that social responsibility is at best a contentious topic. Responsibility viewed alone is already sufficiently complex and the addition of the attribute "social" does not make it easier to handle. Using the typical distinction of dimensions of responsibility I demonstrated that social responsibility can have several meanings. These meanings are partly dependent on circumstances and thus change in the information age. It can therefore make sense, and this is my first conclusion, to speak of social responsibility in the information age.

The second conclusion is that the acceptance of the idea of social responsibility does not suffice as a basis of discussion. Social responsibility in the information age can have different meanings and these have to be clearly defined if they are to be useful. If we do not define the term clearly then the maximisation of profits can also be seen as an expression of social responsibility, a result that would probably be perceived as counterintuitive by most of us. This would then open the door to arguments such as that cutting of jobs, reduction of benefits etc. are all expressions of social responsibility. Thus, if the necessary clarity of the concept is lacking, it is probably more beneficial to simply forget about social responsibility than to talk about it. In this sense, this paper can be viewed as an attempt to start a discussion about the content of social responsibility with the purpose of rendering the notion useful.

ENDNOTES

1 For a more detailed discussion of responsibility see the following texts: Bayertz 1995, Fischer 1999, French 1992, Lenk 1998, May / Hoffman 1991, Neuberg 1997, Paul et al. 1999, Sanger 1991.

2 Most of these thoughts refer to moral responsibility. In the case of legal responsibility the idea of a company as the subject is not new and organisations have been recognised as legal persons for a while.

3 I have discussed these problems of the relationship of anthropology, responsibility, and IT in more detail in Stahl (2002).

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