## Responsibility

## Intro

* This lecture is going to talk a little about responsibility and how it applies to tech. Hoping to give you a basic framework from which to think about it and relate it to readings and discussions, but this is just one way to conceptualize.
* General disclaimer that although I don’t think there’s anything very contentious in here, you should always be engaging with a spirit of critical questioning.
* Hopefully I’ve at least chosen examples that are straightforward enough that they make the points clear.

## What is Responsibility?

* Not talking about describing someone as a responsible person, as a synonym for them being reliable or rule following, although that use of the word would certainly seem linked.
* We are talking about responsibility as the degree to which individuals or groups are *accountable for* actions, events, or other changes in the world.
* This might mean attributing a certain amount of praise or blame to those agents for those actions
* But also it means attributing an imperative to them that they should be thinking about possible actions within some domain.
* For example, a guard is responsible for times when they stop, or fail to stop, unwanted access to the place they are guarding. But they are also responsible, more generally, for the security of that place.
* Their responsibility doesn’t just come into play only at the moments that they are stopping someone or finding out that they failed: they are meant to spend the rest of their time increasing the chances of one of those and decreasing the chances of the other. A guard who has their eyes closed all the time is presumably failing their responsibility here (superhuman echolocation powers notwithstanding)
* So responsibility is an assigning of roles by some larger section of society.

## Traits of Responsibility

* It’s often not an explicit exchange. The guard is presumably being paid, but someone taking on responsibility for looking after a sick relative is not necessarily doing it to get anything back. They are instead maybe benefitting from being part of a society where *this is that sort of thing people do.*
* It’s also not always a choice. Both of the previous examples to some extent chose these roles, but a person who sees a dam breaking gains the responsibility to inform people in danger from it whether they want that responsibility or not.
* It’s not always a specific role, but responsibilities like “following the law” are applied to all of us by virtue of being parts of societies that expect them.

## Factors in Responsibility

* Importantly, it’s variable. It’s usually not that you’re either entirely responsible for something or not responsible at all; your responsibility is dependent on many factors.
* One such factor is power, or capacity. That is, the degree to which you are actually able to make a difference to an outcome. In the example of the dam, the person is much more likely to be considered responsible for alerting others than they are for diverting the flow of the flood water, because they are much more likely to have the ability to do one of these things than the other.
* Related to capacity is the cost to you. If following the law means you will be harmed, many people would agree that you are less obliged to follow it in that instance.
* Another factor is knowledge. This can be knowledge that effects your ability to predict outcomes: the guard is perhaps not as responsible for catching people entering using experimental invisibility cloaks. It might also be knowledge of your responsibilities: the guard was also meant to be watering the plants, but no one has told them.
  + Does this mean though that intentionally avoiding learning about something is a legitimate way of avoiding responsibility?

## Shared Responsibility

* And how about shared responsibility? It seems reasonable to expect that someone’s responsibility to do something could be diminished if they are one of a number of people with that responsibility, but it doesn’t seem that it should disappear entirely.
* One person leaving a room should turn the light off, but if ten people are leaving that room then none of them is likely to feel that same level of responsibility. This can lead to the “Bystander Effect” though, where no one takes action because they each assume someone else will.
* Practically, life is a continuous activity and it is unlikely that there are very many things that are purely one person’s responsibility, without getting incredibly specific.
* Often, problems will require the engagement of many people over a long period of time and perhaps aren’t even within the power of any individual. Something like climate change (or the pandemic) might not even have an agreed roadmap to resolution, but does this absolve everyone of responsibility or just make it less clear?
* Many larger issues require this kind of ongoing engagement from people, and so the responsibility in these instances is not to single handedly produce a “correct action” but to play a proportioned part in a larger, longer-term solution. If people excluded themselves because a problem was too big, it’s easy to see that the largest problems would never have anyone trying to solve them, let alone enough people. Sometimes a problem is only solvable by collective action, and therefore it makes sense that the responsibility becomes being a part of that collection action.
* If we look at the problem of “recycling”, everyone probably bears some portion of the responsibility, but not equally. Some won’t have access to some recycling facilities, so their power is impacted, or the cost to them is higher if they have to travel a long distance to gain access. Some won’t have been informed about resource issues and so their knowledge is impacted. All of these reasons will reduce people’s responsibility for this issue, but only in extreme cases does this go down to essentially nothing.
* Conversely, some people such as those in government or who produce packaging might have greater capacity to individually or collectively make a difference, often by fixing the things holding everyone else back, or by making large changes no ordinary person has the power to enact, such as introducing a country-wide network of recycling centers. The existence of people with this greater power doesn’t absolve the people with less entirely though. Indeed, often they will still need to be motivated by others to take action themselves.

## Responsibility for Ethical Tech

* So let’s have a quick look at some stakeholder groups in tech and have a think about what kind of responsibilities they might have.
* Consumers
  + Some tech solutions are bought specifically by the people impacted most by them (eg phones and their apps)
  + In their individual cases they often have all the power necessary to make a difference, say by not buying an app they disagree with the ethics of
  + Sometimes they don’t have this level of choice, because the thing they disapprove of is a part of a larger collection of products it would be much more challenging to opt out of, maybe because there aren’t obvious alternatives
  + Many people disapprove of some of Facebook’s practices, but the choice to leaving the platform can feel like too much to lose, especially if you don’t feel like it would make a difference as just you. So companies can make lots of unethical choices, as long as they don’t make so many as to push people into mass exodus.
  + Making an impact on mass can also be a challenge, especially if it requires coordination.
  + Average consumers often just don’t have the knowledge of how something works, what potential issues this might lead to, or how to address any problems.
* Subjects
  + I am using this as a term for people who do not specifically choose to use or buy a technology, but who have it used on them by someone else.
  + For example when police decide to start using a particular face recognition algorithm to find criminals.
  + These people have very little power to effect any change, other than whatever is afforded them by campaigning charities or their political system.
  + Relatedly that means the cost to them of making the change might be high.
  + Their knowledge is likely to be worse than in the consumer case, because on top of the same issues they also might not even be aware a technology is being used on them.
* Developers/Sellers
  + These two groups could be separated further, but they have
  + In a direct way the power to make some technological artifact exist or not,
  + Though practically there could be some direct cost to them in doing so responsibly
  + Presumably they also have much greater knowledge of the working of a system and it’s uses, though not necessarily of the larger impact of those
* Researchers/Research funders
  + Sort of like developers, but focused on wider capabilities so maybe not putting an artifact into the world but paving the way for a whole new set of artifacts
  + This could be seen as more or less power. Lesser chance of larger changes, less directly caused.
  + Sometimes research can change route without any cost, sometimes it might essentially end a career to do so, so cost is variable.
  + Should have greatest knowledge of how things work, but maybe less than developers about actual deployment.
* Encourage you all to discuss more stakeholders in more detail on Piazza.