The Social Contract Revised

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate and personal behaviors express responsibility and obligation in doing business. Usually, accountable and obligated actions are explicitly given in legal contracts. The legalized versions that enforce responsibility and obligation are dependent upon moral expectations framed by a social contract.

Obligations and responsibilities influence and frame our everyday experiences. While some obligations and responsibilities are shaped into legal contracts, many of the obligations and responsibilities that govern our daily situations never see the light of day except in felt senses of duty and concerns under girding actions. Obligations and responsibilities are localized social and moral constructs arising from a communal sensibility of people in the ebb and flow of everydayness. Obligations are norms that structure human interaction and locate human relationships within a moral universe of discourse. Obligation is doing one's duty in the face of situational demands. Responsibility is owning up to the effects and consequences of actions in a social situation. Responsible behavior is local and personal.

Responsibility, also, is related to a constellation of supporting values, of which accountability and privacy are significant in their social reach. Accountability works best when private and confidential arenas of action are recognized. Being responsible carries an expectation of privacy. Other constelled expectations are access to information, freedom of speech, and information ownership, both physical and intellectual (Dhillon, 2002).

Obligations and responsibilities are social expectations framing relationships. These social relationships are based on a silent and intuitive communal agreement, the social contract. A social contract is implicit to any society and culture. Although the foundation for many written social and legal documents, the social contract is never written. It is a set of common understandings and assumptions framing situational behavior. A social group is an eventful result of a social contract: A social contract entails association. There are three great theorists on the social contract: Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

BACKGROUND

Previous Ideas on the Social Contract

Hobbes

The social contract for Hobbes is a tacit affair that allows a communal association to form. Community is a natural restraint on humanity's natural perversity and propensity to selfishness and conflict. The social contract is the basis of societal authority, or the power of a society to sanction behavior. The social contract is a restraint on humanity's Darwinian-like tendency to reduce all interactions to power relationships and to coercion (Hobbes, 1988). The social contract confers the rights of citizenship and the duties—being responsive (responsible) to the now common or mutual interests (Halverson, 1972; Hobbes; Solomon, 1992, 1993).

Locke

Persons begin, for Locke, with the freedoms to act, to do what they will with their property, and to live as they see fit. All people are equal to one another. This is a natural state; it rests on natural law. The mutual agreement to join together as a community and political body rests on a social contract (Kendall, 1959; Locke, 1960). The social contract for Locke is based on natural law which argues that persons have certain rights. The notion of the social contract, according to Locke, is expressive of the values of freedom and fairness (Barker, 1970).

Rousseau

For Rousseau, each person naturally tends to self-preservation and maintenance of personal concerns. Socially agreed-upon norms are the basis of any authority within any group. The social contract is conventions of association; it is a solution to situations created when people join together to defend self and property (Rousseau, 1998). Individuals establish a society by agreeing to give up any natural rights for rights based on the collective. Individuals are dependent upon the community; the common will overrides individual will (Crocker, 1968).

Information Technology as a Frame for E-Social Contract

Information technology is a metaphor of hardware and software applications to informational situations and flows, that is, information systems, corporate or personal. Technology is an ideological stance that argues that all solvable problems are defined within technological space (Barbour, 1993; Postrel, 1998). Responsible living in today's world requires understanding technology (Monsma, Christians, Dykema, Leegwater, Schuurman, & van Poolen, 1986). Information technology enhances accountability or responsibility in business affairs (Galvin, 2000; Stoll, 1999).

Views of IT

There are several different views of information technology. These views frame our sense of the social contract. Information technology insinuates itself into our social existence and affects the nature of the social contract (Friedman, 2000). One approach sees information technology as a mere tool, a subsystem within its sociocultural environment. Societal members use information technology framed by the cultural sensibilities of the users. This view considers information technology to be value neutral. A second frame is that information technology is the culture which orients the person and the society. Information technology is the world in which we live, by which we live, and through which we live. Our mode of being in the world is technological; everything is technique. Information technology provides a new context for living. This frame changes the notion of the social contract. This paradigm is the foundation of the information society. A third sense, a hybrid, is that information technology contributes in major ways to how we understand and live in the world, but it is only one aspect of our experiences. In different ways, and to varying degrees, these perspectives frame how we are in the information society.

The Internet and E-Everydayness

The Internet and the World Wide Web are manifestations of information technology as cultural paradigm. Where there is a culture, there is a morality. Where there is a moral sense, there are obligations and responsibilities. The World Wide Web is a digital society that is intentionally created by its users. Users of the World Wide Web must be self-regulators according to accepted standards and rules (Berners-Lee, 1999; Chapman & Dhillon, 2002; Stoll, 1995). The Internet is viewed as a society of multiple local communities. These local communities encapsulate social and ethical values. The Internet is based on a social contract of sorts. The Internet expresses a normative architecture. It is a structure for responsible self-governance. The architecture is made up of free choice, free speech, honesty, and openness or disclosure (Dyson, 1997; Negroponte, 1996; Rheingold, 1993). The information highway, the Internet and World Wide Web, reflect a new social contract (Gates, 1995). The new social contract is digital and its major foci are about decentralization and globalization (Negroponte, 1995; Poster, 1995).

Information Society and E-Lebenswelt

The information society is a significant context for understanding social contract. The information society shows up in the Internet and the World Wide Web (Webster, 1995). The information society is the global connectivity of commercial interests, governmental venues, as well as individual and personal ways of being linked together globally (Friedman, 2000). The information society shapes and frames not only sociocultural environments, but also human thinking (Webster, 1995).

The information society reduces the physical social aspects of human interaction to nothing more than individuals and information flows (Borgmann, 1999). The information society is nothing but information and people. Ultimately, even people exist as information entities. Information is the focus of everything; it is everything. Because informational flows are the basis, society is not centralized; there is a diffusion of information (Brown & Dugwid, 2000). Worldwide connectivity is the information society. Contemporary life for citizens in the information society is digital behavior. Cultural behavior in the information society is the semantic behavior based on digital existence (Borsook, 2000). Information society is a cultural force, a shaper of obligations manipulating the social fabric; its foundation is the e-social contract.

MAIN THRUST OF CHAPTER

The E-Social Contract

The e-social contract is a digital affair. Cyberspace revises the social contract. The digital social contract resides in the expectations, assumptions, and constraints of online actions, such as conversations carried on in e-mails, chat rooms, and instant messaging services. The e-social contract resides in guest books and other forms of relationship building on the Web. The e-social contract informs behavior on the Internet; these are the tacit conventions of right or appropriate behavior at the right times in the right places to the right people. The digital social contract assumes a virtual trust of others encoun-

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