

# The Responsibilities for Online Platforms to Undertake: Cooperative, Legal, and Corporate Social Responsibilities

Zhengqing Yan\*

Victoria Melbourne, The University of Melbourne, 3010, Australia

\*zhengqingy@student.unimelb.edu.au

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**Abstract:** Globalized content platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been deeply involved in people's various public activities, including news production and dissemination, civic education, and transportation. With the growth of these platforms, what responsibilities they should undertake for the content shared on them has become the focus of debate and research among scholars. This research essay argues that cooperative, legal, and corporate social responsibilities are the three major responsibilities that globalized content platforms are encouraged to undertake. On the basis of taking cooperative responsibility, globalized content platforms are obliged to refine their legal and corporate social responsibilities according to the laws, policies, and situations of various countries to deal with government regulation. In addition, platforms are expected to establish a dynamic responsibility adjustment mechanism to keep up with new regulations and changes in national conditions, so as to play the role of the gatekeeper to the Internet.

**Keywords:** Globalized content platforms, Cooperative responsibility, Legal responsibility, Corporate social responsibility.

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## 1. Introduction

Fast-growing globalized content platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Coursera, and Uber have been deeply involved in people's various public activities, including news production and dissemination, civic education, and transportation (Helberger et al., 2018). Generally speaking, these online content platforms can be defined as socio-technical architectures that enable and guide interaction and communication between users through the collection, handling, and flow of users' data (Plantin, 2018). Similarly, Suzor et al. (2018) define content platforms, including search engines and social media platforms, as the intermediaries that bring together or facilitate transactions between third parties on the Internet. It has to be admitted that these intermediaries, which are expanding both in number and scale, have become indispensable elements in modern life (Liu et al., 2021), and they play a crucial role in realizing important public values and policy goals (Helberger et al., 2018). With the growth of these platforms, what responsibilities they should undertake for the content shared on them has become the focus of debate and research among scholars (Helberger et al., 2018). This study has identified three major responsibilities that globalized content platforms are bound to attach importance to.

This research essay argues that cooperative, legal, and corporate social responsibilities are the three major responsibilities that globalized content platforms are encouraged to undertake. On the basis of taking the cooperative responsibility, globalized content platforms are obliged to refine their legal and corporate social responsibilities according to the laws, policies, and situations of various countries to deal with government regulation. In addition, platforms are expected to establish a dynamic responsibility adjustment mechanism to keep up with new regulations and changes in national conditions, so as to play the role of the gatekeepers to the Internet.

In the first place, the concepts of cooperative, legal, and corporate social responsibilities will be explained and concrete examples will be utilized to support the reasons why globalized content platforms should undertake these responsibilities. In the second place, this research will discuss the importance of platforms adjusting responsibilities according to different national regulations and establishing a dynamic responsibility adjustment mechanism. Finally, this paper will return to the notion of cooperative responsibility and discuss intergovernmental efforts.

## 2. Cooperative Responsibility

The concept of cooperative responsibility, first proposed by Helberger et al. (2018), is based on the idea that platforms and users are supposed to reach an agreement on the suitable division of labor, which is related to how they assume the responsibilities assigned to their roles in public space. Helberger et al. (2018) believe that to realize the public value of platform-based public activities, responsibilities cannot be completely assigned to one central player, and it is obliged to establish a dynamic interaction between platforms, users, and regulators. In other words, platforms, users, and governments should shoulder their own responsibilities and work together to realize the public value of platform-based activities. While platforms fundamentally shape and influence users' activities, they do not own the ability to determine users' activities in advance (Helberger et al., 2018). The reality also shows that the commonly used black-and-white responsibility allocation mechanism does not reflect the actual role and ability of platforms in preventing certain adverse outcomes or promoting them to realize their public value (Hoboken, 2009; Horten, 2016). All the facts give a kind of inspiration, that is, platforms are encouraged to assume their cooperative responsibilities, rather than undertake the responsibilities for users and regulatory institutions.

Facebook and Twitter have become major news sources for many Internet users, but these online platforms only partially

control the content distribution since users decide what content they upload to platforms and what type of content they want to consume (Helberger et al., 2018). The algorithm set by platforms provides users with content selection to a certain extent, and platforms never determine what content users produce and share (Helberger et al., 2018). Governments are also supposed to take their cooperative responsibilities in realizing the public value of globalized content platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. For instance, the British government requires online platforms to remove harmful content in time to play the role of the gatekeepers to the Internet (UK Parliament, 2019). The examples of Facebook and Twitter fully illustrate that platforms, users, and governments are bound to assume their respective cooperative responsibilities. To be more specific, platforms need to be responsible for content distribution, users are in charge of content production and consumption, and governments take charge of regulation. To sum up, the cooperative responsibility is the most basic one that platforms need to undertake because the lack of such an important responsibility will break the benign dynamic interaction between platforms, users, and regulators.

### 3. Legal Responsibility

In addition to the basic cooperative responsibility, globalized content platforms are obliged to undertake their legal responsibilities. Legal responsibility, also known as legal liability, indicates that online platforms are obliged to be bound by national laws, and platforms will face fines or lawsuits if they violate laws (Lindsay, 2020). It should be noted that different countries and regions have different provisions on the legal liabilities that platforms need to bear.

For instance, tech giants have a legal responsibility to remove harmful content that appears on their platforms, including bullying, threats, hate speech, violent extremism, and material that harms national security and democracy in the United Kingdom (UK Parliament, 2019). In Russia, Russian parliamentarians have passed legislation to impose restrictions on online media platforms and criminalize acts that insult the state (Vladimir, 2019). The Russian bill will fine platforms that disseminate any content that disrespects the state and government institutions, and offenders may face 15 days in prison (Vladimir, 2019). French President Emmanuel Macron has also warned companies such as Google and Facebook about the necessity to comply with French and European privacy regulations and they would have to pay a price for the disruption they cause to French society (Nicholas, 2018). According to German legislation, namely the 2018 Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), online platforms like Facebook and Instagram are obliged to remove illegal content within 24 hours or face fines of up to 50 million euros, and the German government even requires major social media platforms to report hate speech to the police, otherwise platforms will also face legal sanctions (Tahira, 2020). In Australia, the Privacy Act was introduced as early as 1988 to protect the private data of Australian users on online platforms, and platforms will face serious legal consequences if users' privacy is disclosed (Lindsay, 2020). In a nutshell, legal responsibility is also one of the crucial responsibilities that globalized content platforms should actively undertake. Ignoring the legal responsibility will result in administrative penalties and economic losses for platforms.

### 4. Corporate Social Responsibility

It is still inadequate for globalized content platforms to assume cooperative and legal responsibilities since platforms are also expected to attach importance to corporate social responsibility. McWilliams and Siegel (2001) outline the supply and demand model of corporate social responsibility. Based on the framework proposed by McWilliams and Siegel (2001), the level of social responsibility a company should assume will depend on its size, level of diversification, scientific research, development planning, and advertising. Liu et al. (2021) apply the division method of corporate social responsibility proposed by McWilliams and Siegel (2001) to divide corporate social responsibility into "business ethical responsibility and public welfare responsibility" (n.p.) and emphasizes the self-moral constraints of enterprises. Platform enterprises are obliged to have a sense of social responsibility (Liu et al., 2021). By assuming social responsibility, platform enterprises can obtain long-term value, which is usually translated into the external advantages of the enterprise (Liu et al., 2021). The example of Facebook entering Myanmar fully illustrates that the platform's failure to undertake corporate social responsibility is inclined to trigger devastating outcomes and negative impacts on the platform itself. Facebook's management is well aware of the appalling human rights abuses committed against the Rohingya in Myanmar, but the platform makes no efforts to mitigate those abuses after Facebook enters the country (Galvan, 2020). Instead, it allows Burmese civilians and government officials to use the online space provided by Facebook to incite and plan genocide against the Rohingya people (Galvan, 2020). While these atrocities are taking place, Facebook turns a blind eye to the reports of genocide content and refuses to suspend the accounts of users who are spreading information about the Rohingya genocide (Galvan, 2020). It should be noted that the existing US law and international human rights law cannot compel Facebook to respond to the Rohingya genocide (Galvan, 2020), which means that the company is not legally liable. After the outbreak of such a miserable incident, the image of Facebook is exceedingly negatively affected (Galvan, 2020). From the example of Facebook, it is clear that Facebook should assume a high level of social responsibility due to its large scale and high level of diversification. However, the company solely takes its legal responsibility instead of actively assuming corporate social responsibility, which ultimately gives rise to the tragic outcome of the Rohingya people in Myanmar and the negative impact on the company's image.

Based on the above elaboration, cooperative, legal, and corporate social responsibilities are the three momentous responsibilities that globalized content platforms should undertake. In addition, combined with the discussion and examples of legal and corporate social responsibilities, this paper further argues that globalized content platforms are encouraged to establish a dynamic responsibility adjustment mechanism. The laws and policies of various countries are different and dynamic, and the legal responsibility of a platform will alter with the change of the country served by the platform. Similarly, when the national conditions transform, the corporate social responsibility that a platform is expected to undertake will also change. Therefore, platforms are supposed to establish a dynamic responsibility adjustment mechanism, timely adjusting the legal and corporate social responsibility in different countries, so as to

achieve the public value of platform-based activities.

## 5. Intergovernmental Efforts

Returning to the important concept of cooperative responsibility, this concept emphasizes that the dynamic interaction between platforms, users, and governments is the pivotal point to achieve the public value of platform-based activities (Helberger et al., 2018). Regulatory institutions and civil society have direct or indirect links with users (Helberger et al., 2018). Considering that users have some capacity to push governments in certain directions and that governments have their own design responsibilities to provide guidance and benchmarks against which to assess the ways in which platforms comply with their organizational responsibilities, as well as establishing effective monitoring mechanisms, the regulation of platforms and how they participate in the community of social relations is rendered as a political issue (Helberger et al., 2018; Moss, 2012; Thompson, 2014). Therefore, this section will turn the focus to the intergovernmental perspective and explore the efforts made by governments to promote positive dynamic interactions between platforms and users in order to better understand why the cooperative responsibility is considered to be one of the most important responsibilities for platforms to undertake.

First of all, the Group of Eight countries, which includes the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Canada, and Russia, have agreed on transnational cooperation in information and communication technologies and issued the Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society in 2000, starting to consider how to use new media to improve the social and economic conditions of global citizens (Mansell, 2002). The G8 members have also convened intergovernmental forums in the following years to emphasize the need for digital technologies to be integrated into broader development initiatives and promote that information and communication technologies and their resulting products such as online platforms are obliged to be seen as tools for empowering people to bridge social divides (Mansell, 2002). The policies released by the G8 countries also highlight the need for services provided by information and communication technologies, such as online platform services, to be citizen-centered and meet the demands of citizens and businesses to realize the public value of these technologies (Mansell, 2002). The policies of the G8 countries fully reflect their expectations for information and communication technologies and the derivatives of these advanced technologies, including online platforms, and their expectations are also the basis for them to formulate relevant management policies.

In addition, The European Union has also made some significant intergovernmental efforts. In May 2015, the European Commission has announced that many of its member states, including France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Greece, would cooperate to establish a digital single market (World Bank Group, 2016). Their measures implemented include but are not limited to (1) increasing the digital services and goods provided by e-commerce platforms; (2) Lifting geographical restrictions, and platforms will no longer be able to provide online content to a specific country, but to provide convenient access to content for users in all member states of the European Union; (3) Encouraging investment and innovation in information and communication technologies (World Bank Group, 2016). To sum up, governments around the world have made

unremitting efforts to build a healthy relationship between platforms and users. Therefore, platforms should actively assume their cooperative responsibilities, strive to connect governments and civil society with users and achieve a more harmonious dynamic interaction between governments, users, and platforms themselves.

## 6. Conclusion

To make a long story short, this research essay argues that cooperative, legal, and corporate social responsibilities are the three crucial responsibilities that globalized content platforms are expected to undertake. The cooperative responsibility is supposed to be the basic one that platforms should attach importance to. Without taking that responsibility, the dynamic interaction between platforms, users, and regulatory institutions will be no longer in existence. In addition to taking the cooperative responsibility, globalized content platforms are obliged to refine their legal and corporate social responsibilities according to the laws, policies, and situations of various countries to deal with government regulation. Furthermore, platforms are encouraged to establish a dynamic responsibility adjustment mechanism to keep up with new regulations and changes in national conditions, in order to play the role of the gatekeepers to the Internet. This essay has also discussed the intergovernmental efforts made by the Group of Eight countries and the European Union which further strengthen the above argument of this study. In the process of studying the responsibilities of globalized content platforms, this research finds that users also play a pivotal role in the interaction with platforms and regulatory institutions. Future research can try to study what sorts of behaviors of users will help platforms assume their responsibilities, which will be an interesting research direction, and there is no doubt that more valuable research findings will be obtained.

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