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## Article

# Digital responsibility: Building bridges between organization theory and information systems

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# Digital Responsibility: Building Bridges Between Organization Theory and Information Systems

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**Abstract** This essay collection provides an interdisciplinary discussion between organization theory (OT) and information systems (IS) on digital responsibility. Digital responsibility refers to the design, development, adoption, use, and decommissioning of digital technology in accordance with ethical principles regarding these technologies' social, ecological, and economic impact. The included essays provide interdisciplinary views on *theory*, *method*, and *impact* of digital responsibility. The collection's aim is to facilitate and deepen the exchange between the fields of OT and IS and to stimulate interdisciplinary research on digital responsibility.

**Keywords** Digital responsibility · Organization theory · Information systems · Theory · Method · Impact

## 1 Introduction to Curated Essay Collection

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Digital technology permeates organizations and society. When we think about digital technology, its development and proliferation, we often turn to examples where it has contributed to economic and societal welfare (Chatterjee and Sarker 2024; Veit and Thatcher 2023). However, increasingly, practitioners and scholars alike voice and debate the necessity of understanding and acting on digital technologies' potentially harmful effects—some of which we cannot even foresee today (Al-Amoudi 2023; Mikalef et al. 2022; Mueller 2022; Ngwenyama et al. 2023; Trittin-Ulbrich

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et al. 2021). This debate, particularly in organization theory (OT) and information systems (IS), focuses on questions of digital responsibility (Lobschat et al. 2021; Trier et al. 2023; Trittin-Ulbrich et al. 2021; Trittin-Ulbrich and Böckel 2022). For example, who has responsibility for what and to whom (Stahl 2022)? How can we design responsible futures using digital technology (Hovorka and Mueller 2025; Zimmer and Minkkinen 2024)? How does the nature of digital technology alter our response to this question, meaning, what is particular about *digital* responsibility? Scholars of both disciplines attempt to understand how digital technology changes and impacts—for better or worse—the world we live and organize in. For example, we already see respective efforts in both OT (e.g., Gümüşay and Reinecke 2022) and IS (e.g., Mikalef et al. 2022; Recker et al. 2022; Zimmer et al. 2023b).

However, OT and IS scholars tend to approach these questions from different angles that are rooted in their own distinct research traditions (Barley and Orlikowski 2023). These intellectual traditions have benefited both disciplines, yet they also limit the scope of inquiry and the forms of understanding each discipline can contribute to studying digital responsibility. For example, while OT scholars focus on how *responsibilities for digital technologies* are distributed in social, macro-level structures (Flyverbom et al. 2019; Hinings et al. 2018), IS scholars emphasize the importance of understanding the *IT artefact's responsibilities* in and for social structures (Orlikowski and Iacono 2001). At the same time, a shared interest in phenomena at the intersection of organizing and information technology has fostered important interdisciplinary work among OT and IS scholars in research areas beyond digital responsibility, for example, on institutions and technology (Orlikowski and Barley 2001) or technology and organizational change (Bailey et al. 2022; Barley and Orlikowski 2023). This suggests, first, that the different yet complementary research traditions of OT and IS provide fertile ground for interdisciplinary collaboration. Second, both disciplines share an interest in studying how organizations and society engage with, benefit from, or abuse digital technologies. Hence, digital responsibility offers a productive domain of inquiry through which both disciplines can jointly advance both theoretical and practical insights. However, not all of us in OT or IS may have experience working beyond disciplinary boundaries. This essay collection therefore seeks to stimulate and support interdisciplinary research on digital responsibility between the two fields.

The collection comprises this introduction essay and three thematic essays. The introduction essay outlines two disciplinary fault lines between OT and IS—namely, *questions of agency* and *purpose of theorizing*—that warrant consideration when engaging in interdisciplinary research into digital responsibility. The three thematic essays, authored by scholars from both fields, reflect these fault lines in relation to three themes that have informed, and continue to inform, discourse in OT and IS regarding what constitutes and defines their research: *theory*, *method*, and *impact* (Benbasat and Weber 1996; Benbasat and Zmud 1999; Clegg and Hardy 1998; Cornelissen et al. 2021; Wiener et al. 2018).

## 1.1 What Is Digital Responsibility?

*Digital responsibility* refers to the design, development, adoption, use, and decommissioning of digital technologies in accordance with ethical principles regarding these technologies' social, ecological, and economic impact. We consider digital responsibility as an organizational phenomenon comprising research on the responsibility of corporate actors, also known as corporate digital responsibility (CDR) (e.g., Lobschat et al. 2021; Trittin-Ulbrich and Böckel 2022), digital and AI ethics (e.g., Mikalef et al. 2022; Stahl 2022), and digital sustainability (e.g., George et al. 2021; Kotlarsky et al. 2023; Rosati et al. 2024).

More broadly, digital responsibility highlights the need for a critical research agenda (cf. Trittin-Ulbrich et al. 2021) on digital transformation at the societal, organizational, and individual level (Lobschat et al. 2021; Trier et al. 2023; Vial 2019). For example, digital infrastructures and platforms can improve inclusivity and foster wellbeing (Gebken et al. 2024) but also underpin platform capitalism (Zuboff 2022). Digital responsibility not only captures rising inequality and various forms of labor exploitation and commodification (Kellogg et al. 2020), but also pinpoints to an undermining of democratic institutions via the accumulation of unilateral power, the taking over of infrastructural functions, practices of surveillance and an overall lack of corporate accountability (Flyverbom 2022; Zuboff 2019, 2022). Similarly, AI can improve societal wellbeing by supporting people with disabilities or optimizing energy consumption. Yet, AI also augments the frequency and reach of hate speech, discrimination, and the polarization of public discourses (Schoeneborn et al. 2024). Indeed, scholars started questioning the idea that digital technology, such as AI, can ever lead to truly responsible outcomes (e.g., Schütze 2024), while others outline the potential for such outcomes (e.g., Veit and Thatcher 2023; Zimmer and Järveläinen 2022).

These examples illustrate that the emergent scholarly debate in OT and IS revolves around how to adequately capture and evaluate whether and how organizations and their stakeholders act responsibly on digital technologies' social, ecological, and economic impact (Recker et al. 2025; Trier et al. 2023; Zimmer et al. 2023b).

## 1.2 Aims of this Essay Collection

Given the novelty yet increasing popularity of the concept of digital responsibility in OT and IS research, this essay collection's goal is twofold. First, we aim to inspire and facilitate scholarly reflections on how interdisciplinary collaborations may help explore new avenues for research on digital responsibility, as well as help us in overcoming individual disciplines' limitations to advance theory and methodology for greater impact on understanding digital responsibility in research and practice. This seems important given that digital responsibility is a fairly new as well as expansive research field that requires further scholarly inquiry. In fact, of the subsequent essay contributions, two were written by interdisciplinary teams of OT and IS scholars and thus are exemplary of such collaborative efforts we hope to inspire.

Second, we aim to provide scholars of both disciplines an entry point for joint research that advances our knowledge on the responsible design, development, adoption, use and decommissioning of digital technology to create a positive social, ecological, and economic impact. Particularly, the essays in this collection discuss, from an interdisciplinary angle, matters of theory, method, and impact regarding research on digital responsibility. These discussions shall offer OT and IS scholars a head start to leverage the potential, but also to address the challenges that lie in their respective disciplinary “toolkits” when studying digital responsibility (cf. Orlikowski and Barley 2001).

In the following, we describe two fault lines that pivot differences and potential synergies rooted in the research traditions of OT and IS (see Table 1). These fault lines inform how OT and IS scholars tend to study digital responsibility, and we explain how the three essays of this collection speak to these fault lines. We thereby aim to support the reflections in the subsequent three essays—and in future collaborations between OT and IS.

### 1.3 Disciplinary Fault Lines Between OT and IS

Interdisciplinary collaboration requires us to understand and empathize with our collaborators (Reinecke et al. 2024). On a first glance, such understanding should not be difficult to achieve, given that many commonalities and intersections between interpretative and post-structuralist research conducted both in OT and IS exist (Bailey et al. 2022; Burrell and Morgan 1979; Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). For example, in terms of theorizing, many works from both disciplines have a strong footing in institutional theory (Berente et al. 2019; Hinings et al. 2018; Mignerat and Rivard 2009; Orlikowski and Barley 2001). Likewise, both disciplines display the (more or less simultaneous) occurrence of trends in theorizing, such as a shared interest in foresight and “future making” (Gümüşay and Reinecke 2024; Hovorka and Mueller 2025; Hovorka and Peter 2021; Wenzel et al. 2025a). However, we believe that some key distinctions exist between OT and IS that are driven by different underlying traditions and logics within the two disciplines.

While closely related, interpretative and post-structuralist research conducted in OT and IS feature certain distinct dominant views or—as we call them in this introduction—*fault lines* that make up the distinct characteristics of their respective research traditions. We believe that making these fault lines explicit can create awareness of similarities and differences and facilitate reflection of how to synergize in advancing digital responsibility. Specifically, we outline how OT and IS scholars approach questions regarding digital responsibility when it comes to: *questions of agency and purpose of theorizing* (see Table 1). These two fault lines neither provide a complete account of distinctions between the OT and IT disciplines, which each are marked by sometimes incommensurable schools of thought (McKinley et al. 1999; Tarafdar et al. 2022), nor do they capture the full complexity of studying digital responsibility from a post-structuralist or interpretative viewpoint. Nonetheless, we find them helpful as they allow us to highlight potential future synergies among OT and IS scholars when collaboratively exploring digital responsibility.

**Table 1** Fault lines between organizational theory and information systems in studying digital responsibility

	Organizational theory (OT)	Information systems (IS)
<i>Fault line 1: Questions of agency</i> (indicative references)	Assigns and explores <i>agency of organizations and organizational actors</i> often emphasizing ( <i>ir-</i> )responsibility of macro-level organizational structures Flyverbom et al. (2019) Hinings et al. (2018) Newlands (2021)	Assigns and explores <i>agency and (ir-)responsibility of human and non-human actors</i> (e.g., digital technology) that jointly constitute <i>socio-technical systems</i> Orlikowski and Iacono (2001) Sarker et al. (2019) Sarker et al. (2019) Tarafdar et al. (2022)
Exemplary research questions integrating fault line 1 in OT & IS	How do organizations design digital infrastructures and how are various stakeholder groups involved? How do interactions between human and non-human actors assign responsibility to technological outcomes? How do stakeholder relations of organizations facilitate or constrain the responsible development and application of digital technologies inside firms?	
<i>Fault line 2: Purpose of theorizing</i> (indicative references)	Emphasizes <i>retrospectively</i> studying phenomena of organizing to enhance <i>understanding</i> and <i>explanations</i> of the status quo and critique it Cornelissen et al. (2021) Etter and Albu (2021) Gehman et al. (2017) Sandberg and Alvesson (2021)	Emphasizes <i>design-oriented</i> studying and theorizing of phenomena of organizing around technology to <i>improve</i> future design, development and use of such technologies Hevner et al. (2004) Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) Tarafdar et al. (2022) Veit and Thatcher (2023)
Exemplary research questions integrating fault line 2 in OT & IS	How do historical narratives shape the design of technological infrastructures, and which interventions may help the future design of such infrastructures? How do irresponsibilities around the usage of digital technologies provide a foundation for the design of more responsible digital technologies? What institutional arrangements have historically succeeded or failed in managing the democratic risks of digital irresponsibility, and how can these arrangements inform design principles for responsible digital governance?	

The first fault line between OT and IS refers to how the two disciplines approach *questions of agency* in the context of digital responsibility. Agency here refers to the capacity to intentionally act and thus influence the cause of events and final outcomes; a capacity that many OT and IS scholars find humans share with non-human actors such as tools, protocols, but also digital technologies (Boudreau and Robey 2005; Cooren et al. 2013; Murray et al. 2021). It follows that actors that have agency then are also considered to have an obligation to consider the consequences and impact of their actions, and that they can be held accountable for their actions. Notably, in their pursuit to build theory about organizing and organizations, OT scholars are often interested in questions of organizational agency, that is, how organizations, particularly corporate actors (Haase et al. 2025), and their human members develop and apply digital technologies, and how responsibility and accountability for their positive and negative impacts are distributed across organizational structures and procedures. Given the constantly changing, evolving and generating nature of digital technologies, digital responsibility is difficult to establish

(Recker et al. 2025). Digital responsibility further relates directly to various topics, including inclusivity and diversity in digital innovation (e.g., Sundermeier et al. 2020); labor standards and voice in the platform economy (e.g., Gegenhuber et al. 2021) governance of tech firms (e.g., Flyverbom et al. 2019) or involved stakeholders in digital innovation (e.g., Trittin-Ulbrich and Böckel 2022). Alongside, some OT scholars also developed a critical normative perspective, which underscores the negative and unexpected effects that the organizational creation and application of digital technologies may have on various stakeholders (e.g., Pignot 2023; Trittin-Ulbrich et al. 2021). Positively, these works emphasize that the harmful, unintended, or otherwise irresponsible application of digital technologies is often the result of profit-driven organizational structures and procedures (e.g., Etter and Albu 2021; Martin 2019). Grounded in this observation, organization theorists also make suggestions how to adapt and change organizational structures and procedures for the better, to allow organizations and their members to act more responsibly, as well as call out the monopolistic and disruptive setup of “megacorporations” (Whelan 2021) that provide others with digital technologies.

At the same time, it can be said that research in OT pays limited attention to the agency of digital technology itself. Barley and Orlikowski (2023), for example, argue that OT research often treats technology too abstractly and deterministically. With such treatment, responsibility is not assigned to the technology but the involved individuals, and macro-level or collective organizational structures. More recent OT studies, however, theorize the agentic role of technology and its impact on (ir-)responsible organizing (e.g., Gray and Suri 2019; Newlands 2021), as well as the affordances of digital technologies for and within organizations (e.g., Kellogg et al. 2020). Yet, research in OT still dominantly addresses questions of digital responsibility from the organizational, structural perspective, rather than the perspective of agency and subsequent responsibility of digital technology (e.g., Flyverbom et al. 2019).

In contrast, IS is starting off with a dedicated focus on technology’s agency by adopting a socio-technical systems perspective. Socio-technical systems include humans (often referred to as human actors), and technological artifacts (often referred to as non-human actors) and therefore, IS scholars study technology in organizations as part of a socio-technical system (e.g., an organization) (Sarker et al. 2019). This view involves recognizing that technological artifacts have agency (Orlikowski and Iacono 2001), which casts questions on whether (and how) digital technology itself has responsibility for its organizational and societal impact, and how human and non-human actors collectively enact digital (ir-)responsibility. Consequently, following this perspective, IS scholars also explore whether these systems have (or do not have) responsibilities and investigate how these systems’ actors (human and non-human) assign responsibility to other actors or bear themselves responsibility for digital technologies’ impact (e.g., Stahl 2022).

The question of whether digital technology can have responsibility is reflected in IS research on whether digital technologies are value-free, or whether they bear—or can be designed to bear—certain values due to their materiality (e.g., Albrechtslund 2007; Spiekermann et al. 2022; Spiekermann and Winkler 2022; Van De Poel and Kroes 2014). Accordingly, the IS debate on digital responsibility revolves around

organizations' (and their actors') responsibility for the design, development, use and implications of digital technology. This debate produced concepts such as CDR (Mueller 2022), digital-sustainable business model transformation (e.g., Recker et al. 2024; Watson et al. 2022; Zimmer and Järveläinen 2022), questions of ethics and sustainability in and of technology generally (Stahl 2022; Veit and Thatcher 2023) as well as more specific concerns regarding technologies such as AI (Mikalef et al. 2022; Minkkinen et al. 2023; Van Wynsberghe 2021; Vassilakopoulou et al. 2022) and debates about when digital transformation can be considered responsible (e.g., Zimmer et al. 2023b). Accordingly, IS researchers address questions of digital responsibility from an agency perspective of human *and* non-human actors (e.g., digital technology) that jointly constitute socio-technical systems.

While IS research accounts for the agency in digital technology, critical voices argue that IS overly subscribes to technology-solutionism (Aanestad 2023; Morozov 2013). The research tradition in IS involves a constructive orientation toward digital technology providing progress and solving problems (Aanestad 2023). While notable exceptions on understanding negative effects of digital technology, for example, technostress (Salo et al. 2022), bias in artificial intelligence (Mikalef et al. 2022) or critical work on how digital technologies create power structures (Ngwenyama et al. 2023; Zuboff 1988), exist, IS research dominantly understands digital technology and its advancement as providing solutions to the world's problems. Indeed, common definitions of digital transformation often mention that the use of digital technology triggers (organizational and/or social) improvements (Vial 2019; Zimmer et al. 2023b). We can observe this emphasis not only in IS research but also policymaking more broadly. The design, appropriation or use of digital technology appears in almost any solution to problems regarding public services, reducing bureaucracy, mobility or fighting climate change. IS scholars have pointed to this technology-solutionism (Aanestad 2023; Veit and Thatcher 2023) and argued that digital responsibility involves departing from continuously developing new digital technology for known or new problems, to designing digital technology that can adapt to changing problems (Veit and Thatcher 2023) or even support sustainable degrowth (Aanestad 2023). Some even pose that IS should engage with the question of whether the design and development of particular digital technology is even desirable (Aanestad 2023; Ngwenyama et al. 2023). However, despite these calls for questioning the dominant technology-solutionism, IS research still mostly investigates digital technology as a potential solution rather than a potential problem (see also essay 3).

The second fault line between OT and IS regards the disciplines' purpose of theorizing. Post-structuralist and interpretive works from both disciplines share certain theories (e.g., practice theory, institutional theory) and methodologies (e.g. case studies, ethnographies), but scholars emphasize different purposes when employing these theories and methodologies. While OT scholars have recently called for more prescriptive (e.g., Hanisch 2024) and prospective theorizing (e.g., Gümüşay and Reinecke 2024), their work has traditionally focused on retrospective analyses—examining past phenomena to identify best or worst practices and to develop explanatory theory (Cornelissen et al. 2021). By theorizing digital responsibility retrospectively, OT scholars can uncover how and why certain actions or systems

were deemed responsible or irresponsible. This approach also enables a deeper assessment of the normative dimensions of digital responsibility and supports ethical critique of the social, ecological, and economic principles that underpin organizing with and around digital technologies.

Similarly, IS scholars also study phenomena in retrospect. However, the IS discipline's design-oriented tradition instills a future-orientation into IS work (Hevner et al. 2004; Hovorka and Peter 2021; Österle et al. 2011). For example, IS scholars study IS development in retrospect to derive learnings for improving future IS development (Sidorova et al. 2008). They also draw on theory to inform artifact design; artifacts that they design, deploy, and evaluate in collaboration with practitioners to develop theoretical learnings on both behavioral and design aspects (Hevner et al. 2004). Hence, IS research on digital responsibility can produce applicable prescriptive and prospective theorizing of digital responsibility by developing a critique of (Cecez-Kecmanovic 2011; Stahl 2008) and improvements to digital technology design in attempts to create positive social, ecological, and economic impact through digital transformation (Hovorka and Mueller 2025; Zimmer et al. 2023b).

Table 1 summarizes the two fault lines—*questions of agency* and *purpose of theorizing*—that mark broad differences between the OT and IS disciplines and translates them to the context of studying digital responsibility by providing exemplary interdisciplinary research questions.

To unleash the full potential of interdisciplinary research between OT and IS of digital responsibility, we suggest that scholars should strive to define research questions that allow them to overcome the two fault lines. On the one hand, inquiring who or what is responsible for a particularly responsible or irresponsible outcome of digital technologies requires the acknowledgment that agency for the responsible development and application of digital technologies is shared amongst various actors in and outside organizations. On the other hand, to overcome fault line 2, research questions should be formulated in ways that allow scholars to fulfill multiple purposes with their research, that is both finding explanations for the status quo but also developing visions to improve future developments.

#### 1.4 Outline and Contribution of this Essay Collection

This collection comprises three individual essays from author teams from both disciplines who have joined forces to reflect on the two fault lines (Table 1) and how they could inform our disciplines' discourses on theory, methods and impact of digital responsibility research.

Essay 1 situates the first and second fault line in OS and IS scholars ongoing discourses on theory. The authors distinguish three views of theorizing that we can find in both disciplines. They highlight that OT and IS scholars often draw on the same theories, which provides a basis for interdisciplinary research into digital responsibility. Offering a vantage point, they present avenues for such research by their three views of theorizing.

Essay 2 discusses how the fault lines reflect in the two disciplines' understanding and use of methods. The authors outline three different understandings of methods and how these inform where we place agency for theorizing, measuring, or practicing

digital responsibility. Moreover, we can read essay 2's deliberations on methods as a wake-up call to recognize, understand and act upon our—researchers'—agency in and for digital responsibility.

Finally, essay 3 reflects the two fault lines highlighting complementarity in OT and IS scholars' understanding of agency and purpose of theorizing. Discussing these reflections, the authors outline a three-step approach of inquire, involve, and integrate that can facilitate interdisciplinary work towards impactful research in the area of digital responsibility.

As a collection, this introduction and the three essays make three contributions to studying digital responsibility. First, since both OT and IS research offer rich theoretical foundations for studying digital responsibility (see fault line 1), this collection brings together insights from both fields, providing researchers with a holistic and complementary theoretical toolkit for exploring digital responsibility. This is important because the complexity and potentialities of digital responsibility demand theoretical perspectives that can account for both structural and socio-technical dimensions. As digital technologies increasingly permeate organizations and organizational life, understanding responsibility cannot be confined to a single level of analysis or disciplinary lens. For example, the distinction between use, design, and regulatory view in essay 1 offers a structured yet flexible framework that enables scholars to analyze and theorize digital responsibility from multiple vantage points. This complementary approach not only enriches the theoretical discourse but also equips researchers with the conceptual tools needed to address the multifaceted ethical and social challenges posed by digital technologies. Yet, we also acknowledge that drawing on complementary theoretical views in one research project often runs counter to prevailing academic publishing norms, which privilege coherent, discipline-specific theoretical frameworks. We therefore propose exploring new ways of packaging and approaching digital responsibility through interdisciplinary collaboration (see also essay 3). For example, doctoral research projects could be intentionally designed as interdisciplinary collaborations between OT and IS scholars, structured to incorporate diverse theoretical views—such as use, design, and regulation—across the individual studies that comprise a doctoral thesis.

Second, this collection advances our understanding of how to empirically examine digital responsibility. While OT and IS follow distinct traditions of inquiry (retrospective vs. design-oriented, see fault line 2), this collection explores diverse yet complementary methodological approaches for studying digital responsibility. Specifically, essay 2 introduces three interpretations of the term “method” that offer different pathways for engaging with digital responsibility. These methodological perspectives not only enable interdisciplinary collaboration but also broaden the scope for empirical engagement with digital phenomena. Beyond these, we also recognize the potential of alternative forms of methodological advancement. For instance, a qualitative meta-study—an approach gaining traction in both OT (e.g., Habersang et al. 2019; Omanović and Langley 2023) and IS (e.g., Berente et al. 2019, 2021)—offers promising avenues for generating novel theoretical insights as well as design implications across disciplinary boundaries (Habersang and Reihlen 2025).

Lastly, this essay collection underscores the importance of understanding digital responsibility not merely as an academic construct, but as a pressing practical and societal concern. By studying digital responsibility and actively translating and communicating our findings to practitioners and policymakers, scholars can contribute to tangible improvements and affect how organizations engage with digital technologies. Such engagement can influence the design, development, adoption, use and decommissioning of digital technology in ways that promote favorable social, ecological, and economic outcomes, resulting in potentially great impact (Wenzel et al. 2025a). In this regard, essay 3 outlines important steps—inquire, involve, and integrate—to create holistic impact. In addition to traditional academic studies, more innovative forms of presenting and communicating interdisciplinary research—such as installations, documentations, or storytelling through comics and other forms of drawings (e.g., Coslor et al. 2022; Gerde and Foster 2008)—can spark curiosity and engage diverse audiences in interdisciplinary conversations around digital responsibility.

To conclude, we suggest that OT and IS scholars should be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their respective disciplines in addressing questions of digital responsibility. Digital responsibility is a complex phenomenon that requires interdisciplinary thinking and acting. All three essays of this collection emphasize that it is important that further collaboration between OT and IS scholars occurs, in order to come up with novel and alternative ways of theorizing and researching on digital responsibility, as well as developing positive impact. Importantly, with the three contributions outlined, we fulfil the aims of this collection of creating awareness and facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration. Yet, acknowledging the aforementioned fault lines can only be the first step in this process. Next, scholars must make further efforts to “blend” the respective theoretical and methodological tool kits of the two disciplines for greater impact. We hope that this essay collection inspires such interdisciplinary efforts in the future.

## 2 Essay 1: Interdisciplinary Theoretical Reflections On Digital Responsibility

*M. Gierlich-Joas, L. Dobusch, E. Schüßler*

Building bridges between two disciplines first and foremost requires an examination of similarities and differences in dominant theoretical approaches; in our case: theories for studying questions of digital responsibility. In the following, we (1) reflect on the need for theory when studying digital responsibility, (2) outline three different theoretical perspectives from organization theory (OT) and information systems (IS), and (3) point out open questions and further interdisciplinary directions on theories of and for digital responsibility.

## 2.1 The Need for Theories when Studying Digital Responsibility

While studying digital transformation is a challenge in itself because of its wide-reaching impact on organizations and society as well as its continuously changing nature (e.g., Sciuk et al. 2023; Wessel et al. 2021) the requirement of responsibility in/of digital transformation adds another layer of complexity (Zimmer et al. 2023b). It calls for interdisciplinary research on the individual, organizational and societal level (Trittin-Ulbrich et al. 2021). Studying the complex and interdisciplinary questions emerging around digital responsibility, “there is nothing as practical as a good theory” (Lewin 1944, p. 27). In addition to potential practical applicability, theorizing digital responsibility is also a way of scholarly agenda setting: prestigious journals require theoretical contributions, and in striving for underpinning digital responsibility theoretically, scholars are forced to make connections to previous theoretical frameworks and paradigms, which allows cumulative knowledge production.

More specifically, theories can be useful in diverse ways. In IS, Gregor (2006) distinguishes *analyzing*, *explaining*, *predicting* and *designing* as different purposes of theorizing. When applied to digital responsibility, theories can create narratives of digital responsibility, solve problems in the field, and establish scientific truths (Leidner and Gregory 2024). In OT, Cornelissen et al. (2021) distinguish *explanation*, *interpretation*, and *emancipation* as three different interests of theorizing. These purposes go hand-in-hand with different underlying research paradigms, often differentiated as post-positivism, interpretivism and poststructuralism (Gephart 1999). Already in these different summaries it becomes visible that predicting and designing purposes are less emphasized in OT than in IS (Österle et al. 2011).

Despite acknowledging the different functions of theories, both fields have engaged in a debate on the importance of theorizing in relation to solving a practical problem. In OT, we see an increasingly lively debate on how to develop a theoretical contribution (e.g., Suddaby 2014), how to balance theoretical novelty with practical and empirical contributions (e.g., Davis 2010; Hambrick 2007), and how to make theorizing more useful for solving societal challenges (e.g., Gümüşay and Reinecke 2024) of which digital responsibility would just be one example. In IS, a central debate revolves around ways of balancing the technological artifact and theoretical analysis (e.g., Orlikowski and Iacono 2001). Having a theoretical core can be seen as a necessary condition or merely a form of establishing academic legitimacy when writing papers (Weber 2006). Thus, while some consider theory a prerequisite for a high-impact contribution (e.g., Burton-Jones et al. 2021), others claim a “theory fetish” (e.g., Avison and Malaurant 2014) or “obsession” (Dennis 2019), calling for a change in publication practices towards prioritizing practical impact—a debate also common in OT.

When it comes to theorizing digital responsibility, OT builds on elaborate reflections about organizational responsibility, as well as on a longstanding interest in the role of digital technology in mediating work processes (e.g., Adler 1992), disrupting industries (e.g., Mangematin et al. 2014) or creating new forms of organizing (e.g., Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015). IS draws on a research tradition of examining technological artifacts in the context of wider socio-technical systems (e.g., Sarker et al. 2019; Sidorova et al. 2008) as well as on an established de-

sign-oriented research stream that reflects on socio-technical dynamics—including ethical aspects—as a basis for the design of technology (e.g., Österle et al. 2011). Taken together, different forms and styles of theorizing in the field of digital responsibility can assist in unpacking what individuals and organizations do in relation to digitalization and why, they can provide information on how to design artifacts or regulatory frameworks in a way that fosters digital responsibility, and they can provide tools for revealing and changing structural inequalities (Gregor 2006).

In sum, both fields share similar research interests and debates about the role and function of theories, as well as some common theoretical frameworks, which we will outline below. A critical question in both fields is whether specific styles of theorizing yield themselves more readily toward having practical impact as well as advancing theory (Krlev 2023). This is a critical question with respect to “grand challenges” in management research generally (e.g., Gümüşay et al. 2022), and the field of digital responsibility specifically.

In the following, we synthesize different theoretical lenses to study digital responsibility in the context of both fields: the *use view*, *design view*, and *regulatory frame view*. Each view provides different angles on how to use, design, and provide a regulatory frame for digital technologies to foster digital responsibility. Whereas the use view, represented well by practice-theoretical traditions, is common in both disciplines, the design view with an emphasis on technological artifacts (rather than organizational structures) has a stronger tradition in the field of IS. The regulatory frame view, represented by institutional theory, has a stronger foundation in OT but is also becoming increasingly widespread in IS. Due to the nature of this essay, we do not strive for completeness, but rather aim to provide a stepping-stone for further discussion and research at the interface of these three lenses, which are not only complementary across OT and IS, but also among themselves when it comes to addressing different facets of digital (ir-)responsibility. Hence, we selected perspectives that were already common in both disciplines and can serve as a bridge for more interdisciplinary cooperation. We also selected theories that speak to different levels relevant for establishing digital responsibility: individual, organizational/technological, and societal/institutional.

## 2.2 Three Theoretical Views from OT and IS for Studying Digital Responsibility

### 2.2.1 Use View

A *use view* on digital technology, represented by practice theoretical approaches, is common in both fields and hence provides fruitful avenues for describing and explaining the (ir-)responsible use of digital technology. Here, the challenge lies less in establishing a dialogue between OT and IS, but rather in leveraging practice theory more fully to understand larger patterns of digital (ir-)responsibility (Sele et al. 2024). Practice theories pay attention to the ways in which contextual conditions are created, enacted, and instantiated through social practices (Nicolini 2012; Reckwitz 2002). Often building on Giddens (1984) theory of structuration, practices are understood as recurring patterns of behavior through which actors enact, reproduce,

but also change social structures, analytically divided into structures of domination (power), signification (meaning) and legitimation (norms).

Following practice theory, digital technologies are not seen as external to human agency, but as emerging from people's recurrent use of and interaction with a particular technology (e.g., Orlikowski 1992; Orlikowski and Robey 1991). Conversely, practices involve multiple artifacts and objects (Engeström 2000, 2001; Schatzki 2002, 2005), many of which in the present day are digital technologies. Digital practices, thus, can be seen as a “nexus of doings and sayings” (Barley 1986; Reckwitz 2002) involving technologies, but not in a deterministic way. At the same time, the practical use of digital technology shapes and structures technologies and the structures of signification, legitimation and domination associated with them (Ortmann et al. 1990).

While few studies have so far applied practice theory to explicitly examine digital responsibility, several studies have shed light on (ir-)responsible digital work practices. For instance, several studies have examined new, digitally intermediated forms of work at the interface between narratives of flexibility and autonomy and practices of control and surveillance (e.g., de Vaujany et al. 2021) This theme has been examined particularly in the context of platform-mediated work, where existing research has illuminated different forms of worker agency and resistance in the context of algorithmic management systems (e.g., Ajonbadi et al. 2025; Cameron and Rahman 2022; Christin 2017). According to practice theory, these practices can either change or—sensu Burawoy (1979)—reinforce existing structures of domination. In the context of traditional organizations, practice theory has been used to show how the introduction of new technology can change not only work practices but also the underlying role structures and identities, including relationships of power in a team or organization (e.g., Barley 1986). Regarding the question of digital responsibility, we can follow this tradition to understand how possibilities for surveillance change structures of domination in a team or how the use of artificial intelligence tools changes relationships, skills and knowledge (e.g., Faulconbridge et al. 2024; Retkowsky et al. 2024), thereby also affecting entire industries or professions on a more macro level (e.g., Barley and Kunda 2004; Barley and Orr 1997). Practice-based studies could also shed light on the invisible ‘digi-work’ behind the scenes (Justesen and Plesner 2024) as well as on practices of inclusion and exclusion found, for example, in digital communities (Dobusch et al. 2019).

In sum, while studies of digital work practices have a long tradition in both OT and IS, the potential of practice theory for understanding digital responsibility has not been fully utilized yet. A particular strength of practice theory lies in two possibilities. First, practice theory can “zoom in” to specific work contexts to understand the ways in which people use digital technology, for example, using ethnographic approaches. Second, practice theory can “zoom out” to identify connections between these practices and other practices, institutions and broader social structures (Nicolini 2009). Given that, from a practice theoretical lens, technologies-in-use always draw on extant structures of legitimation, signification, and domination, practice theory can also be used not just in a descriptive and explanatory, but also in an emancipatory way. Following Sele et al. (2024), even “large” phenomena of societal concern, amongst which we can count digital responsibility, can be traced to patterns

that are created through our everyday actions and practices. Studying actors, their actions and the interconnections between these actions can thus shed light on how digital (ir-)responsibility is (re-)produced in action, indicating possible avenues for change.

### 2.2.2 Design View

Going beyond a description and explanation of the uses of digital technology, a *design view* uses theories to help in designing artifacts that are digitally responsible in themselves or facilitate digital responsibility. While organizational design has been at the core of OT in its formative years (e.g., Mintzberg 1979), a design science approach is now much more deeply rooted in the IS discipline (Österle et al. 2011). At the same time, design questions are receiving renewed attention in OT as well (Jelinek et al. 2008; Joseph and Sengul 2025; van Aken and Romme 2009), not least in the context of digital technologies, where Garud et al. (2008) suggest that design is both the medium and the outcome of action. Other subfields of management research have already embraced design perspectives regarding questions of sustainability, as in the study of Reinerth et al. (2019), which develops a supply chain sustainability risk map as technological solution design for the problem of sustainable supply chain governance, indicating the usefulness of design science for understanding digital responsibility in both OT and IS.

Taking the design view, IS scholars distinguish between kernel theories and design theories. Kernel theories are fundamental concepts and world views that guide the overall design and implementation process of an artifact (Walls et al. 1992). While not representing artifacts in themselves, kernel theories provide learnings on how to develop a novel artifact and what the artifact should look like at the beginning of a design process. One example in the field of digital responsibility is value-sensitive design or value-based engineering (e.g. Albrechtslund 2007; Spiekermann and Winkler 2022), which implies the design of artifacts with an inherent value-focus. Applying moral frameworks early in the design process lets researchers and practitioners assess the impact of the envisioned artifact on human, socio-ecological, and economic values, and the long-term impact on the affected stakeholders (Spiekermann et al. 2022). Furthermore, prior works have introduced principles for digital responsibility. For example, Trier et al. (2023) postulate the following principles: sustainability, participation, functionality, data privacy, transparency, fairness, norms & values, and accountability. Similarly, we find frameworks on how to foster sustainable corporate digital transformation (Liu et al. 2019), or how to design responsible AI business models (Zimmer et al. 2022). These theories and principles can serve as a foundation for the development and implementation of artifacts that fulfil the criterion of digital responsibility.

In contrast, design theories are the central outcome of a design project (Iivari 2020). Design theories comprise the derived knowledge from functioning artifacts so that similar artifacts can be built accordingly. Several studies in this tradition have developed artifacts for digital responsibility. For example, Nagbøl et al. (2021) have introduced a tool to measure the risk of AI systems. Schoormann et al. (2022) have presented an artifact to design business models for sustainability. Both ap-

proaches represent a systematic procedure for implementing digital responsibility (see essay 2). To shape sustainable digital workplaces, studies have problematized the “dark sides” of digital workplace technologies, e.g. employee stress and algorithmic biases (e.g., Giermindl et al. 2021) and have designed employee-empowering digital workplace technologies accompanied by design theories as solutions (e.g., Gierlich-Joas et al. 2024). In the context of urban design, prior work has developed conceptual artifacts that can facilitate citizen involvement in the design of future cities as nascent design theories (e.g., Becker et al. 2023).

In sum, the contributions of design-oriented projects in IS range from situated implementations of an artifact (e.g. a dashboard measuring digital responsibility—a *method for measuring digital responsibility and its impacts*, see essay 2) over nascent design theories (e.g. design principles on how to design digitally responsible artifacts—a *method as a systematic procedure*, see essay 2) to well-developed design theories (e.g. grand theory on the phenomenon of digital responsibility) (Gregor and Hevner 2013). Referring to the question of how theories can guide the design of artifacts for digital responsibility, the necessity of kernel theories and design theories has been a topic of controversial scholarly debate (Iivari 2020). While some have criticized the excessive emphasis on theories, others consider them as crucial to making a scientific contribution and developing the body of knowledge. We believe that kernel theories like value-sensitive design can steer the design of artifacts that facilitate digital responsibility beyond technical design requirements. Furthermore, design theories that contain design principles for a specific class of systems can serve as a blueprint for the design, implementation, and use of the artifact.

Complementary to the artifact-oriented design perspective in IS, OT design perspectives in the tradition of classical works such as Blau and Scott (1962) or Mintzberg (1979) emphasize both the contingency and, more recently, also processual nature (Garud et al. 2008) of organizational design. Where we see most potential for a fruitful exchange is by integrating artifact- and organization-focused design perspectives. In OT, recent studies of co-creation involving experimentation and prototyping following a pragmatist perspective provide promising entry points for such an endeavor (e.g., Wegener et al. 2024).

### 2.2.3 Regulatory Frame View

The *regulatory frame view*, represented by institutional perspectives on digital technology, allows addressing the question of how theories help in shaping the institutional context of digital responsibility. To some degree, this perspective relies on theories originating in sociology and economics that explain the rise, reproduction and revision of supra-organizational structures such as laws, norms and cultural-cognitive maps. These three structures represent what Scott (2013) identified as the three pillars of *institutions*, which represent the mostly taken-for-granted structures of any social system. Broadly speaking, an OT perspective on institutions emphasizes the role of organizational fields for stabilizing expectations of its members and fueling institutionalization of organizational forms and practices through isomorphic processes (Dimaggio and Powell 1983). IS research has drawn on concepts such as institutional logics to explain the diffusion and implementation of technological so-

lutions (e.g., Berente et al. 2019) for a review of institutional theory in IS in general (see Mignerat and Rivard 2009). From an OT perspective, a critical question is how novel digital organizational forms, digital institutional infrastructures, and digital institutional (Gebken et al. 2024) gain social approval (i.e. legitimacy) in the eyes of critical stakeholders and how they impact existing institutional arrangements (Hings et al. 2018; Vergne 2020). An IS angle, in turn, can explain the rise and path dependence of socio-technological standards (Botzem and Dobusch 2012; Markus et al. 2006). The regulatory frame view can either have a stronger descriptive, use-oriented focus (e.g., Zimmer et al. 2023a) or a stronger design-oriented focus (e.g., Niemimaa and Niemimaa 2017), depending on which institution-theoretical tradition is followed.

Applications of a regulatory frame view on the issue of digital responsibility at the intersection of both disciplines would, for instance, aim to understand how digital forms of organizing gain legitimacy, how they decouple a seemingly responsible facade from their actual practices (Meyer and Rowan 1977), and how institutional frameworks need to be changed to incentivize and enforce digital responsibility (e.g., Gorwa 2019). These changes constitute responsible practices, which can be implemented top-down or bottom-up. An organizational field perspective has already been used to understand the possibilities for regulating platform organizations as a novel form of organizing work that disrupts existing industries and labor markets in more responsible ways (e.g., Kirchner and Schübler 2020; Pernicka and Schübler 2022). Similarly, Frenken et al. (2020) used the perspective of institutional logics to understand the institutional and regulatory challenges raised by platform organizations, because they operate at the interface of multiple institutional logics. In this context, digital responsibility can be conceptualized as a (special) case of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), drawing on the ample body of research related to its institutionalization (e.g., Bice 2017). Given the inherently transnational scope of digital phenomena, the regulatory frame of digital responsibility is situated mostly on the transnational level, overlapping, competing or conflicting with national frames. Insofar as regulatory frames are developed by non-state actors and in line with mostly voluntary CSR standards, regulating digital responsibility can be conceptualized as a case of transnational standard-setting (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2002; Timmermans and Epstein 2010), while national institutional variation also remains an important object of institutional research on digital phenomena (e.g., Davis and Sinha 2021; Mair and Reischauer 2017).

When focusing on the peculiarities of digital responsibility, the regulatory frame view provides opportunities for cross-pollination between OT and IS perspectives on (path-dependent) standardization processes. This is because digital responsibility will require accounting for, building upon and potentially even implementing algorithmically governed processes (Katzenbach and Ulbricht 2019), thereby inherently fusing technological or legal (traditionally more in the focus of IS) and social-normative (traditionally more in the focus of OT) standardization dynamics. A path-dependence perspective (Sydow et al. 2009) offers a longitudinal perspective that emphasizes both contingency and constraint of processes that (at least partly) unfold behind the back of the actors involved. This could be particularly helpful to analyze

and reflect on ongoing processes of regulatory standard-setting in fields such as (identifying) disinformation (Tahraoui et al. 2023) or AI at large (e.g., Zech 2023).

### 2.3 Avenues for Further Interdisciplinary Research

In the light of the novel phenomenon of digital responsibility, the question arises if theory is needed and wanted. Following Burton-Jones et al. (2021), “theorizing is now more critical than ever” (p. 301), given the complexity of our reality and the new possibilities of theorizing based on new data and instruments (e.g., Miranda et al. 2022). In this essay, we apply representative theories from the angles of “use”, “design”, and “regulatory frames” to the context of digital responsibility. While both disciplines share the use view, the IS discipline is more rooted in the design view, while the OT discipline is more oriented towards the regulatory frame view.

**Table 2** Exemplary research directions on theorizing about digital responsibility creating synergies between OT and IS

Theoretical lens	Research direction	Exemplary research questions
<i>Use view</i>	Practices for digital responsibility in organizations and society (zoom in)	In which ways are people using digital technologies (e.g. at the workplace) responsibly or irresponsibly? How do responsible digital practices spread within and across firms (e.g. taking the perspective of diffusion of innovation)?
	Connections between practices for digital responsibility in organizations and society (zoom out)	How do different practices connect and shape strategies for digital responsibility?
	Resources and capabilities to achieve digital responsibility	Which resources are needed to achieve digital responsibility? Which capabilities are needed to achieve digital responsibility?
	Adoption of digital technologies for digital responsibility	What is the adoption or acceptance of digital responsibility artifacts for individuals or in firm settings?
	Novel ways to theorize about digitally responsible use	How can novel ways of data collection be used to theorize about the use of digital responsibility (e.g. computationally intensive theory construction)?
<i>Design view</i>	Theories to build artifacts for digital responsibility	Which theories can be used as kernel theories for the design of artifacts for digital responsibility?
	Novel design theories to study digital responsibility	How can artifacts for digital responsibility help in theorizing about the phenomenon?
<i>Regulatory frame view</i>	Standardization for digital responsibility	Who is responsible to initiate, implement, and monitor digital responsibility in firms? What are the path dependencies of and between standards for digital responsibility?
	Institutional lens	How is digital responsibility shaped by institutional pressures and norms? Which issue fields (e.g., privacy, security, or anti-trust) are of particular relevance for questions of digital responsibility?

Following these views and bridging them can create synergies between OT and IS and leads to multiple promising research avenues at the intersection of both fields, some of which are suggested in Table 2 below.

Even more enriching would be a dialogue not just across disciplines, where actually the uses of theories are quite similar and complementary, but across theories. In particular, the use and the regulatory frame view would both benefit from an integration with the design view, and vice versa. For instance, when considering the relevance of design for digital responsibility, questions revolve not just around the design of digital artefacts, but also the organizations and institutions in which these are used. Here, Van Aken (2005) argues that organizations are at once artefacts and “natural systems”. Change agents seeking to re-design organizational structures hence have to accept a fluid and complex link between interventions and outcomes. Here, practice theory, which differentiates between ostensive and performative routines (Feldman and Pentland 2003), can be used to understand the structuring of digital responsibility at the interface between design solutions and user practices over time. Similarly, the regulatory frame view sensitizes us to the isomorphic dynamics of organizational design. Better understanding dynamics of diffusion can enrich research on both technological and organizational design when it comes to providing contexts in which digitally responsible practices can develop. Conversely, insights from the design view in both disciplines could be useful for questions of institutional design, particularly in the highly dynamic and radically novel context of digital technologies, especially regarding platforms and artificial intelligence. Finally, and building on research on practice-driven institutional change (Schildt and Kodeih 2025; Smets et al. 2012), a practice view on institutions may be particularly useful and even necessary in times of rapid changes in (digital) practices.

Our brief review has only focused on theories from a post-positivist or interpretivist tradition, because here, bridges across OT and IS can most readily be built or have already been built. Yet, the topic of digital responsibility would clearly also benefit from more ‘critical’, post-structuralist research traditions, more established in OT than in IS. This is another area for cross-pollination which has not been discussed in this essay. Generally, the suitability of a theory for the study of digital responsibility in a certain setting can be determined by specific criteria or qualities.<sup>1</sup> Yet, while we have focused our review on existing theories that have already or will be able to build bridges among OT and IS research, these theories may need to be expanded so that they can analyze, explain, predict and design digital responsibility (Burton-Jones et al. 2021). When studying new grand challenges, “knowledge will be advanced and new theorizing *may* occur” (Ram and Goes 2021, p. 479), for example, because of co-creation processes or interventionist, action research approaches (Reinecke et al. 2022). In addition, looking with ‘old’ or established theoretical lenses at new digital phenomena comes with its own challenges, such as applying historically contingent terminology to new phenomena or accounting for changes in meaning and understanding of certain concepts over time. Here, reflections about

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<sup>1</sup> Such epistemological criteria for (or qualities of) a suitable theory are: useful, falsifiable (in the sense that it can be proven wrong), broad, insightful and surprising, imaginative, and parsimonious (in the sense of simplicity) (Bacharach 1989; Corley and Gioia 2011; Gregor 2006; Leidner and Gregory 2024).

adequate methodologies for examining these new phenomena are equally important, not least at the interface of both disciplines.

### 3 Essay 2: Grasping Digital Responsibility: Interdisciplinary Methodological Reflections On Digital Responsibility in Research and Practice

*B. Mueller, C. Mihale-Wilson*

Essay 1 highlights the growing importance of theorizing digitally responsible use in novel ways—an endeavor that hinges on methodological clarity. Several research questions outlined in essay 1 point to this need, including how responsible practices spread, how alternative data collection methods support theory development, and how artifacts can be designed to enact responsibility (e.g., Table 2, essay 1). Yet, as digital responsibility research increasingly spans disciplines like OT and IS, divergent interpretations of “method” risk hindering theory-building. For instance, what one community sees as a valid normative framework, another may misinterpret as an empirical model. Such tensions can hinder collaboration and obstruct the theory-building efforts that essay 1 calls for.

In response, our essay discusses key methodological challenges and opportunities in collaborative research between OT and IS on digital responsibility. In this, we delve into how varied understandings of *method* can lead OT and IS researchers to prioritize different aspects of digital responsibility, resulting in diverse interpretations and findings across the scholarly community, ultimately shaping the future direction of digital responsibility research.

#### 3.1 Methodological Key Challenges of Researching Digital Responsibility

One of the key questions in digital responsibility research is who bears responsibility for the digital as we move toward more digital futures—in other words, who is the subject of this responsibility? The issue of different interpretations of agency across OT and IS—that is, the first fault line revealed by the introduction—is further complicated by the plurality of stakeholders that contemporary literature on digital responsibility acknowledges. For instance, Trier et al. (2023) emphasize that individuals, corporations, and public institutions contribute to a sustainable, inclusive, and value-based digital society. This plurality results in a challenging research environment. If OT and IS researchers are to be successful in their collaborative efforts to advance digital responsibility in practice, they face two key challenges: one conceptual and one methodological.

The *conceptual challenge*—rooted in the evolving and fragmented understanding of digital responsibility (Herden et al. 2021; Mihale-Wilson et al. 2022; Mueller 2022)—is well addressed throughout this collection and prior literature. Several reviews aim to synthesize the concept (Carl et al. 2025) (e.g., Carl and Hinz 2024; Cheng and Zhang 2023; Knopf and Pick 2023; Merbecks 2023), yet no unified concept of digital responsibility emerged. While such fragmentation can generate

valuable insights, it also hampers coherent research (Mueller and Hovorka 2022). For OT and IS collaboration, three issues are especially problematic: inconsistent terminology (*jangle fallacy*), vague definitions masking research gaps (*jingle fallacy*), and competing explanations that obscure complementarities (*jungle conundrum*), all of which impede knowledge integration (Kellogg et al. 2020; Scharfenberger et al. 2021; Song et al. 2021).

Beyond these conceptual challenges, which are not the focus of this essay, there are significant methodological challenges. Specifically, we want to sensitize digital responsibility researchers toward diverging interpretations of “*method*” across disciplines. Unacknowledged, these divergences present a critical barrier to interdisciplinary collaboration and the development of unified theorizing on digital responsibility. In what follows, we discuss the three distinct understandings of method that OT and IS researchers must consider when studying digital responsibility: (1) method as a systematic procedure to implement digital responsibility in practice, (2) method as a means to quantify digital responsibility activities, and (3) method as an approach to study digital responsibility scientifically.

### 3.1.1 *The Triple Meaning of Method in Digital Responsibility*

These three understandings are not mutually exclusive, nor do they map neatly onto disciplinary boundaries. However, researchers may gravitate toward one perspective over others based on their disciplinary traditions, research aims, or methodological assumptions. This variation does not imply a divide between OT and IS but can complicate collaboration when underlying assumptions remain implicit. As a result, it may lead to diverging research priorities, interpretations, and findings, making it harder to accumulate shared insights or build a coherent interdisciplinary dialogue around digital responsibility.

### 3.1.2 *Method as Systematic Procedure*

In line with the traditional IS focus on improving the design and development of technology and their governance structures (see the introduction), *method as a systematic procedure* refers to organized and structured approaches that guide the process of understanding, designing, and implementing digital responsibility in practice. Such methods ensure that each step and activity to implement digital responsibility in organizations is carefully planned and executed to achieve consistent and reliable outcomes. The tradition of building structured frameworks and recommendations for the design and implementation of technology, along with the governance structures around it, is well-established in IS (Legner et al. 2017). This tradition positions IS researchers to provide essential guidance for organizations striving to translate abstract digital responsibility principles into practical, sustainable practices (Mihale-Wilson et al. 2022).

Accordingly, IS researchers have developed frameworks and procedures to support organizations in implementing digital responsibility—though these efforts were not always labeled consistently. The more recent introduction of terms like *corporate digital responsibility* (Lobschat et al. 2021) has helped consolidate these

approaches under a governance-oriented umbrella. While early work emphasized abstract ethical norms (e.g., Brey 2012; Mason 1986; Walsham 1996), recent contributions increasingly focus on how such principles are enacted in practice (Becker et al. 2023; Lüthi et al. 2023; Weißenberger and Marrocco 2022; Wirtz et al. 2023). Yet, despite the emergence of practical frameworks from both scholars and public or private actors (BMUV 2021; Bundesverband Digitale Wirtschaft 2020), many organizations still lack clear standards or reference points for translating normative principles into action (Johnson et al. 2024). We build on this shift to examine how methodological assumptions shape the study of digital responsibility in organizational contexts—thus continuing essay 1’s call for stronger theory-building, while also anticipating essay 3’s deeper engagement with impactful practices on the ground.

Historically, the challenge of translating normative principles into action reflects a common hen-egg dilemma: while practitioners look to academia for guidance, scholars seek empirical cases to study. We observe two interrelated efforts to overcome this stalemate:

First, some early efforts draw on critiques from corporate social responsibility (CSR) research, where scholars argue that CDR does not require separate attention, as CSR already encompasses these concerns (Herden et al. 2021). While parts of the digital responsibility community counter this argument by pointing to CDR’s particular conceptual nature and merits as an independent field of research (Mihale-Wilson et al. 2022; Mueller 2022), we suggest that the CSR-CDR debate can be leveraged productively. Specifically, future research should scrutinize extant CSR research to identify whether and which mechanisms, tools, and frameworks could help address current challenges in translating norms and values related to digital initiatives into responsible corporate practices (Christ et al. 2024). After all, if CSR and CDR are overlapping to a great extent, systematic procedures employed in corporations’ CSR practices should be transferable to address the challenges that CDR covers (Mihale-Wilson et al. 2022; Mueller 2022).

Second, an increasing number of organizations are implementing *digital responsibility practices*—often not based on academic guidance but driven by their own initiatives and internal frameworks. Since the launch of the German CDR Initiative in 2018, the topic has gained visibility, enabling scholars to study emerging real-world cases. These developments offer a valuable foundation for exploratory research, helping to identify and address persistent principles-to-practice gaps. Notable contributions include studies of early digital responsibility efforts among early adopters (e.g., Becker et al. 2023) or exploring emergent and diverse digital responsibility regimes (Johnson et al. 2024; Yokoi et al. 2023).

Similar to the challenges stemming from conceptual plurality, procedural plurality will remain a persistent issue for digital responsibility research. We suggest that more exploratory, theory-building work is needed to develop a shared understanding of what *practicing digital responsibility* entails—beyond articulating core values in corporate codes of conduct. Such research will also be crucial for strengthening the link between academia and practice, helping to address the hen-egg dilemma outlined earlier.

### 3.1.3 Methods for Measuring Digital Responsibility and Its Impacts

Beyond a lack of standardized procedures and practices, understanding digital responsibility is complicated further by the inherent difficulty of measuring its progress and impact. This brings us to the second perspective, where *method is mostly understood as a means to quantify digital responsibility activities*—i.e., developing and using systematic approaches to measure and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of digital responsibility initiatives within organizations. This lens, more closely associated with OT, emphasizes how digital responsibility efforts influence organizational practices, their structures, policies, and governance to integrate responsible digital practices, shaping their overall performance and success. A key challenge in this context is that responsibility is often distributed across multiple stakeholders. Traditionally, “responsibility for the effects brought about by technological artifacts was attributed to their designer, producer, retailer or user. ICTs challenge these assumptions by calling for notions of distributed responsibility” (Floridi 2015, p. 8). Against the backdrop of *distributed responsibility*, various issues come to mind: If digital responsibility is distributed, who exactly bears it? Is everyone equally liable and responsibility becomes compounded as a consequence? Can responsibility be divided? And, if so, is it divided such that everyone bears a (equal or weighted) share of the overall responsibility? Or can we distinguish different sub-responsibilities? Can we ensure sub-responsibilities are fairly distributed across stakeholders? Ultimately, how do we make sure that distributed responsibility is not equal to *dissolved responsibility*—i.e., a state in which responsibility becomes so spread across actors that no single party feels accountable, leading to inaction, blame-shifting, or ethical blind spots?

The complexity of digital responsibility is amplified by its multi-level nature (Trier et al. 2023), involving diverse actors with complex relationships. Recent debates increasingly frame digital responsibility through an ecosystem lens (Stahl 2022), encompassing institutions, organizations, individual actors, and even artificial (i.e., technological) actors (Lobschat et al. 2021). This perspective broadens earlier views focused on designers and their creations (e.g., Moor 1985), now recognizing additional stakeholders such as investors, future talent, and non-users (Mueller 2022).

Each stakeholder brings distinct goals, expectations (Mihale-Wilson and Carl 2024), and—consequently—metrics. As a result, measures of digital responsibility impact at a particular level (e.g., at the corporate level) do not necessarily apply to measure impact at another level (e.g., individual level). For instance, the *digital dividend* metric measures the impact of digital responsibility at a societal level (Dörr and Lautermann 2024) but less so from a business perspective. Especially at the corporate and individual levels, clear suggestions for measuring impact remain scarce. While digital responsibility is often framed around risk mitigation, impact assessment must also capture positive aspects such as improved innovativeness, increased brand value, or customer loyalty (Lobschat et al. 2021). In the end, impact metrics must reflect the varied motivations driving firms to engage with CDR (Carl et al. 2023).

Another challenge lies in the malleability of digital technologies. As early as the mid-1980s, Moor (1985) recognized that one of the key challenges of computer ethics is derived from the computer being an almost universal tool. Then, this meant that competent designers could shape a computer to do almost anything their imagination (and their technical skill) allowed them to conceive. Today, this malleability extends well beyond design: many systems are increasingly open and malleable in use (Richter and Riemer 2013), and data-driven applications such as machine learning continue to evolve post-deployment (Mueller 2022). This makes it difficult to anticipate unintended consequences of such artefacts (Albrechtslund 2007) making it challenging to establish corresponding methods for measurement.

Nonetheless, impact measurement remains vital—especially in corporate contexts, where *you can't manage what you can't measure*. Existing digital responsibility frameworks offer initial ideas—for instance, Lobschat et al. (2021) use a basic development-deployment-use-impact lifecycle model—but concrete operationalizations are lacking. Contributions like Carl and Hinz (2024) or Cheng and Zhang (2023) who provide first multi-dimensional operationalizations of digital responsibility, represent an exception and point toward potential ways forward.

Ultimately, the digital responsibility measurement challenge stems from a lack of standardization in corporate practice. Yet, developing valid and reliable indicators is essential—and recent research (e.g., Carl et al. 2023; Mihale-Wilson et al. 2021) shows encouraging progress, with a growing number of studies emerging in this direction.

### 3.1.4 Method as Scientific Method

When exploring the relevance of *method* in the context of digital responsibility, a third meaning of the term we want to highlight is that of *method as an approach to study digital responsibility scientifically*—that is, the research methodologies (e.g., quantitative and qualitative studies, mixed methods analyses, literature-reviews) that can be applied to understand, explore, and theorize digital responsibility from different angles. In this regard, we want to encourage digital responsibility scholars to critically reflect on whether their research apparatus is fit to conceptually and empirically engage with this topic. Reflecting on digital responsibility research from this angle reveals four key challenges: (1) gaining access to ethically sensitive data, (2) accounting for researchers' own ethical positions in digital responsibility research, (3) developing theories that remain relevant and adaptable in the face of evolving digital responsibility challenges, and (4) incorporating technological advancements that influence what can be measured and how.

First, doing research in an ex-definition value-laden context is challenging for researchers who usually like to stand on the sidelines of objectivity. However, researching ethics is often a complex and sensitive topic. For instance, some individuals we engage with in our research might hesitate to disclose their underlying values for fear of being judged or revealing value conflicts. And even when people are willing to share, ethical considerations are difficult to share explicitly. While we as researchers might be able to study people's explicit morality during interviews

or fieldwork, these people's underlying moral intuition or their moral theories and meta-ethical reflections are often challenging to access.

In response to this challenge, we propose that joint OT and IS research on digital responsibility needs to expand its research apparatus by drawing on methods suggested outside our traditional disciplinary boundaries. For instance, research approaches that draw on visualizations (e.g., McCarthy and Muthuri 2018) can help people explicate issues they would otherwise struggle to express. Similarly, research based on ongoing diaries (e.g., Bolger et al. 2003) shows the potential to reveal thoughts and assumptions that otherwise often remain too implicit to share. For example, Schultze and Leahy (2009) show the potential of such methods in the context of digitalization research. Such approaches can also help to engage stakeholders with less voice and power.

To enable such research, the ability to identify and enroll a broad and diverse set of stakeholders is an essential foundation for digital responsibility research. Especially when emphasizing an ecosystem perspective—a growing focus in research (esp. Mihale-Wilson and Carl 2024; Stahl 2022)—identifying and working with the boundaries of the phenomenon (Reynolds 2011) is critical.

Second, several challenges pertain to us as OT and IS researchers and our role in the research process. Helpfully, Whiting and Pritchard (2017) offer collated advice on responsible conduct of research in the context of digital ethics more generally. An issue we feel expands this list and deserves discussion is that we as researchers, too, rely on our own morality in navigating our daily decision-making. It is only prudent to be aware that our assumptions and values guide how we engage with our informants and data (Zimmer et al. 2023b). But how do we ensure our values do not interfere with those we are researching? And how do we navigate the tensions between imposing our moral norms and being value-neutral to the extent that we adopt a relativistic everything-goes mentality?

These tensions lead us to suggest that the methodological approaches employed by digital responsibility researchers will likely need to expand to include less frequently employed research designs. Chief among these are approaches inspired by the principles of *critical* research. One of the hallmarks of critical research is that it “challenges established social conditions and institutions and oppressive forms of control, often enabled and supported by IS, which prevent the realization of humane, just and free organizations and society” (Cecez-Kecmanovic 2011, p. 442). In doing so, critical research emphasizes that researchers need to be aware of prevailing social structures (e.g., power relations) as well as underlying and often implicitly held assumptions (e.g., ethical values) (Klein 2009). This allows them to appreciate their research subject's views and actions in a rich context. At the same time, extant guidance on critical research compels researchers to specifically reflect on and account for their own espoused theories (Myers and Klein 2011).

Another important perspective in this context is to engage with the mutually constitutive interplay of values and discourses. Such a more discourse-oriented perspective allows digital responsibility researchers to focus on how specific values come about while not making the values per se the focus of research. The contribution of research rooted in discourse ethics has long been recognized (Mingers and Walsham 2010), but corresponding studies remain scant to date (see, e.g., (Stahl

2008) for a notable exception). Seeing that research rooted in discourse ethics is also recognized in important reference disciplines of the digital responsibility community (e.g., Rehg 2015), we suggest that exploring this perspective adds to the digital responsibility scholar's research apparatus.

Third, a core challenge lies in theorizing digital responsibility in a way that remains meaningful as technologies, societal contexts and values evolve. While we can describe and explain today's emergent digital phenomena, we must ask ourselves whether the theories grounded in present-day experiences still apply to future contexts? This aligns well with the question discussed earlier in this collection where the need for the development of new theories when researching digital responsibility is discussed. We can observe a generational shift in how people relate to digital technologies and the values they attach to them. Digital natives, for instance—i.e., those who have grown up with digital technology—tend to have different expectations around privacy, transparency, and automation than digital immigrants, who learned to use digital systems later in life (Czerski 2012). For example, digital natives may be more accepting of data sharing or algorithmic decision-making, while digital immigrants may be more skeptical or cautious. These cognitive and normative differences influence how individuals perceive digital responsibility and what they consider “responsible” action—posing a challenge for theory-building that assumes stable, shared values across time. Without acknowledging these evolving baselines, we risk producing theories biased toward present or even past worldviews. Hovorka and Mueller (2025) emphasize this limitation and propose speculative foresight as a way to open up research to alternative futures—not to predict them, but to theorize beyond today's dominant frames. Such future-oriented theorizing is gaining traction in both OT and IS research (e.g., Gümüşay and Reinecke 2022; Hanisch 2024; Mueller and Hovorka 2024; Zimmer and Minkkinen 2024).

Fourth, in line with earlier arguments on assessing digital responsibility's impact, it is crucial to consider technological advances in measuring corporate practices. We see unprecedented potential in leveraging real-time processes and digital trace data, which—compared to self-reported data—offer greater visibility into actual changes in corporate practice. While such research is not yet widespread in digital responsibility research, it is argued to make context more endogenous and accessible (Pentland et al. 2020) and guidance on how to conduct trace-based research is increasingly available (e.g., Grisold et al. 2024; Vial 2019). In this regard, working with use and process data might be regarded as being slightly more salient in IS than in OT research and could prove an important complementarity when research combines both disciplines.

Across these points, we posit that approaches to studying digital responsibility scientifically will increasingly mature to endogenize more and more facets of the concept. Even things that seem remote today—such as values, context, and futures—will increasingly become a part of our thinking in this domain and the research apparatus we employ needs to mature accordingly.

### 3.2 Methodological Ambiguity as an Opportunity for Interdisciplinary Research

The tripartite understanding of *method* in digital responsibility research is problematic only if it remains unacknowledged. When left implicit, these divergent assumptions can hinder collaboration, complicate knowledge accumulation, and fragment the field. Similarly, they impede different disciplines in bringing their respective strengths to the table. However, once made explicit, this methodological plurality becomes a valuable resource. Each perspective brings unique strengths, offering complementary insights into the multifaceted nature of digital responsibility. Rather than viewing this diversity as a barrier, we argue that it can serve as a foundation for richer dialogue, cross-fertilization of ideas, and more nuanced theorizing across disciplinary boundaries.

While we support research across all three perspectives, we also emphasize the importance of developing a shared layer of *convergent understanding*—an integrative framework that enables researchers to locate their work within the broader landscape. This does not imply that the tripartite interpretations should converge into a single, unified view. Instead, we advocate for a form of coordinated pluralism, increased interdisciplinary dialogue, mutual awareness, and cumulative theorizing across these different methodological stances. Without such a meta-level coordination, there is a risk that the field may fragment, making it harder to synthesize insights or maintain shared direction (Mueller and Hovorka 2022).

But when based on a clear and explicit engagement with the tripartite understanding of method we establish above, future digital responsibility research in which OT and IS scholars collaborate (potentially also joined by colleagues from other disciplines such as legal studies, computer science, or philosophy too) can work toward such convergent understanding. In Table 3 we summarize our discussion by highlighting some of the respective strengths we see across the two main disciplinary contexts we consider here. In that discussion, we do not suggest that any one of the three understandings primarily maps to any one discipline in particular. We rather seek to sensitize scholars that they need to position their work clearly and encourage them to actively look for ways in which their work integrates with and informs the other perspectives. In this vein, we are convinced that linking research across the three perspectives is a great opportunity for future research. For instance, advances in research methods such as working with process data (i.e., our third perspective) can greatly contribute to our efforts to make digital responsibility and its impacts more measurable (second perspective). Similarly, productively engaging with futures (third perspective) will be critical for conceptual advances in digital responsibility which then, in turn, inform new procedures (e.g., Johnson 2024) (first perspective). Current research also highlights that the question of how to measure the actual impact of digital responsibility initiatives (second perspective) is a key component of our research's ability to assess and evolve systematic procedures aimed at making digital responsibility more accessible in practice (first perspective). Only through active and deliberate interdisciplinary dialogue and coordination can we develop such mutually informing and integrated approaches needed to build a unified, actionable

**Table 3** Tripartite understanding of method and some illustrative applications

Understanding of Method	Goal/Focus	Illustrative contributions	Disciplinary context
1. Method as Systematic Procedure	Structured guidance for implementing digital responsibility in practice; focuses on frameworks, principles-to-practice translation, governance recommendations	Becker et al. (2023); Legner et al. (2017); Lobschat et al. (2021); Mihale-Wilson et al. (2022); Wirtz et al. (2023)	Predominantly IS (design/governance) CSR-informed OT work offers complementary procedural focus
2. Method as Measurement Instrument	Emphasis on operationalizing digital responsibility constructs, assessing outcomes Development of tools and metrics to assess the effectiveness and impact of digital responsibility practices; considers distribution of responsibility and multi-level evaluation (e.g., firm, individual, society)	Carl et al. (2023); Carl and Hinz (2024); Carl et al. (2023); Dörr and Lautermann (2024); Mihale-Wilson et al. (2021)	Primarily OT (ecosystem & multi-actor emphasis) Complemented by IS in operationalizing lifecycle and data-driven metrics
3. Method as Scientific Inquiry	Research methodologies to study digital responsibility conceptually and empirically; includes critical, visual, and future-oriented approaches; emphasizes researcher positionality and evolving values	Grisold et al. (2024); Gümüşay et al. (2022); Hamisch (2024); Mueller and Hovorka (2024); Stahl (2008, 2022); Vial (2019); Zimmer and Minkinen (2024)	Mixed. Both, OT & IS increasingly explore speculative and anticipatory methods, but OT more often embeds this in sociological and normative theorizing, while IS links it to design and systems thinking

framework for digital responsibility—one that supports both theoretical inquiry and practical application.

As digital technologies increasingly permeate all aspects of modern life, ensuring that digital innovation is conducted responsibly is not only crucial for mitigating potential risks. Even more importantly, we posit that maximizing the positive impacts of these technologies on all stakeholders (e.g., environment, society, companies, individuals) also critically depends on digital responsibility. Consequently, the advancement of digital responsibility is essential to align technological progress with ethical standards and societal values.

In this evolving landscape, we like to close with the idea of equating the role of the digital responsibility theorist to that of “Bob the Builder”. Just as Bob tackles various construction challenges with a “can-do” attitude and diverse toolkit, digital responsibility researchers must employ a range of methodologies, perspectives, and tools to address the multifaceted nature of digital responsibility. This includes bridging gaps between abstract ethical principles and practical implementation within organizations. But it is also an issue of embracing the differences between OT and IS as potential complementarities through which the two fields can meaningfully expand each other’s work on digital responsibility. It is up to us as a research community to provide the critical insights necessary for responsible digital transformation. By developing robust theoretical foundations and practical guidelines, we help organizations navigate the complex terrain of digital responsibility.

## 4 Essay 3: Fostering Interdisciplinary Impact Around the Potentialities of (Ir)Responsibility In and Through Digitalization

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### 4.1 Digital (Ir)responsibilities and Impact Potentialities

Digital technologies can be leveraged to both create new business models and tackle societal grand challenges such as climate change (George et al. 2021). For instance, entrepreneurs have used digital platforms to provide consumers with temporary access to goods, thereby foregoing the need for ownership (Eckhardt et al. 2019), or employed artificial intelligence (AI) to advance the social good (von Richthofen et al. 2022).

However, there is also a dark side to digital technologies (Mikalef et al. 2022; Trittin-Ulbrich et al. 2021). While platform entrepreneurs have created new services that make the lives of users easier, they have also enabled new forms of control and precarious working conditions (Kellogg et al. 2020; Schor et al. 2020) as well as discriminatory discourse (Gümüşay et al. 2022) with ambivalent consequences for users’ and workers’ wellbeing (Buhalis et al. 2020; Rashid et al. 2024; von Richthofen et al. 2022). Moreover, while AI can be used to tackle sustainability challenges, for example, by increasing the efficiency of the power grid, it can also be used to maintain or even aggravate the status quo by being deployed to optimize

fossil fuel production. In addition, building and operating AI is energy- and resource-intensive. Consequently, scholars increasingly discuss both AI for sustainability and sustainable AI (Digitalization for Sustainability 2022; Rolnick et al. 2023; Veit and Thatcher 2023).

These examples illustrate that digital technologies and data expand the space of possible action and of opportunities for both responsible and irresponsible behavior. In other words, the digital amplifies not actualities but potentialities (Bohn et al. 2023). It allows, for example, for both more and less transparency, as well as more autonomy and control. The potentialities offer both opportunities for and threats to responsibility, meaning that they can result in responsible but also irresponsible outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial that actors across all levels critically reflect upon their role and work towards leveraging the potentialities for responsible digitalization while, at the same time, containing the potentialities for irresponsible digitalization (Zimmer et al. 2023b).

As digital technologies amplify (ir)responsible potentialities, their impact becomes deeply entangled with broader political, economic, societal, and environmental dynamics. We are living in a time of profound transformation, marked by rapid, multidimensional, and often unsettling developments. Political polarization, the growing power and opacity of global tech companies, academic warnings about climate change, social fragmentation, and democratic backsliding all point to a world at risk. In the face of these complex and pressing challenges, it is no longer sufficient for academic work to remain siloed or limited in scope. Rather, we need a holistic approach to creating responsible impact.

Scholarship, particularly at the intersection of OT and IS, holds unique potential to holistically create responsible impact. Both disciplines traditionally have their own but complementary strengths. OT brings deep insights into organizational change and power structures (e.g., Flyverbom et al. 2019; Hinings et al. 2018). IS contributes practical design thinking (e.g., Hevner et al. 2004; Österle et al. 2011) and a nuanced understanding of socio-technical systems (e.g., Sarker et al. 2019; Sidorova et al. 2008). When combined, these traditions can produce scholarship that is not only descriptive or explanatory but also interventionist and emancipatory. This convergence allows us to leverage responsible impact while containing irresponsible impact of digitalization.

In this essay, we outline the complex relationship between digitalization, responsibility, and interdisciplinary, impact-oriented scholarship. We highlight the complementarity of OT and IS in addressing the key fault lines of agency and purpose of theorizing (see Table 1). Finally, we argue that we urgently need to build bridges between both disciplines through three steps: inquire, involve, and integrate. With this, we can create a holistic scholarly impact, one that not only interprets the world but also helps to shape it responsibly.

## 4.2 Interdisciplinary Impact

Both OT and IS as disciplines already contribute significantly to digital responsibility and its impact. Each discipline traditionally possesses its own strengths and focuses as they approach the aim for scholarly impact from different angles. We here aim

for a holistic perspective to leverage responsible outcomes while containing the irresponsible effects of digitalization.

When describing digital responsibility and its impact, we chose a perspective especially focused on social and ecological impacts. Social and ecological impacts are defined as any positive and negative change in environmental quality and social interaction resulting from the design, development, adoption, use, and decommissioning of digital technologies, which are able to shape and change the processes of an established (natural and societal) system (Chiapello 2023). This includes both the effects through the use of digital technologies and the effects while using digital technologies, for example, the use of AI to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> and also the CO<sub>2</sub> footprint of AI tools (Bowen and Wittneben 2011; Kaack et al. 2022; Rohde et al. 2024). However, this is more than counting each company's good and bad impacts and summing them up when using digital technologies (Serafeim et al. 2020). Rather, it is about the system level and the collective impacts of the activities of many, diverse actors, including companies, governments, and other organizations. This is a form of ecosystem impact that “bind(s) various players together” and assesses impacts “which cannot be achieved alone” (Stroehle et al. 2025, p. 8). This points to the important advantages of an interdisciplinary perspective on impact and (digital) responsibility.

As outlined in the introduction to this essay collection, OT and IS researchers traditionally look at digital responsibility from different, yet complementary angles. When looking at these fault lines, also the different strengths of OT and IS to create responsible impact of digitalization become apparent. Along the first fault line of questions of agency, the disciplines address different levels of impact (i.e., individual, organizational, and institutional level) vis-à-vis technology. IS researchers often focus on the intersection of technologies and individuals, whereas OT researchers emphasize organizations and institutions and the role of technology in such phenomena. Along the second fault line of purpose of theorizing, both disciplines examine impact across various temporal dimensions. OT is more concentrated on retrospective analysis of the past and the present, and IS intends to make more future-oriented propositions. These differences, however, are differences in emphasis, not in kind or absolutes.

In the following, we describe in more detail how the fault lines between OT and IS traditionally are shaped in terms of impact that researchers aim to make and what is needed to overcome them for a holistic approach to responsible impact. We draw on the structure from the introduction of this collection (see Table 1). To illustrate our arguments, we will use the impact of generative AI (GenAI) on work and workers as an example—a topic that has received attention both from OT (e.g., Hsu and Bechky 2024) and IS scholars (e.g., Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2024).

#### 4.2.1 Questions of Agency

IS research commonly starts from the premise that agency is distributed across human and non-human actors (see, e.g., Orlikowski and Barley 2001; Rose et al. 2005). A developer, a user, and a GenAI model itself are all part of a socio-technical system that co-produces outcomes. For instance, IS scholars may study how an algorithm

deployed in recruitment (e.g., CV screening) interacts with HR staff decisions and biases, the data it is trained on, and organizational values. Frameworks like Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005) and Sociomateriality (e.g., Cecez-Kecmanovic 2011; Orlikowski 2007) allow IS to conceptualize not just what actors do, but how agency emerges from networks of interactions.

Researchers in OT tend to focus on social interactions with a rich tradition of examining the complexities and interrelationships of actors and their embeddedness. IS can draw from this to conceptualize the social context better. Equally, OT researchers who are interested in better capturing the role of technology and contributing to increasing its responsible impact would benefit from learning from IS to consider more the role of individual actors (especially developers), the technology itself, and their relationships.

This presents a clear complementarity for creating responsible impact along the levels of individuals, organizations, and institutions vis-à-vis technology: OT can enrich its understanding of agency by integrating the IS view that emphasizes technological embeddedness and material agency, especially when addressing phenomena such as GenAI where boundaries between human intention and algorithmic action blur. IS's emphasis on technology as an agent and its detailed unpacking of technical affordances can help OT better account for how new tools like GenAI are reshaping the contours of agency at all levels including interactions between human intelligence (HI) and AI (Gümüşay et al. 2023). OT could benefit from adopting IS's socio-technical lens, while IS may enrich its frameworks by more strongly integrating social intricacies and questions of authority, legitimacy, and organizational politics. A joint, holistic approach for responsible impact of digitalization would acknowledge that neither humans nor technologies act in isolation—they co-construct agency in complex organizational contexts.

#### 4.2.2 Purpose of Theorizing

OT researchers have a strong tradition and well-developed methods in theorizing to retrospectively study phenomena of organizing, thereby enhancing our understanding of the status quo and critiquing it. In order to positively impact society, however, OT scholars could focus more on prospective theorizing (Gümüşay and Reinecke 2024). Regarding GenAI in the workplace, this would mean involve not only studying how organizations are implementing GenAI and how this shapes work identities and routines, but also on “beliefs, predictions, and imaginaries” of the future of work as they existed among different societal actors (Dries et al. 2025)—which should also include less powerful actors such as workers and unions.

IS often has a design and abstraction orientation as IS scholars do not merely interpret existing systems but they actively propose, build, and evaluate future ones. Theorizing emerges through cycles of design, testing, and abstraction, often via methods like design science research or prototyping (Hevner et al. 2004). For instance, IS researchers might co-design an AI-assisted hiring platform, test it with users, and derive theoretical insights about transparency, fairness, or usability. This makes IS inherently future-oriented, focusing on how technology could or should be developed and used, rather than only how it currently is. There is clear mutual

**Table 4** Possible formats for the three steps Inquire, Involve, and Integrate

Step	Possible actions and formats	Existing illustrative formats
Inquire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Read articles and visit conferences from respective other discipline</li> <li>– Invite colleagues from other disciplines to own research seminars and events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Individuals purposefully reading articles and attending conferences that are core to other disciplines</li> </ul>
Involve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Collaborate on joint papers, special issues, and funding applications</li> <li>– Organize interdisciplinary research seminars and workshops</li> <li>– Experiment with initial joint knowledge transfer formats such as podcast episodes or newspaper articles</li> <li>– Organize dialogues, roundtables, co-creation workshops with broad audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– This essay collection</li> <li>– Interdisciplinary research project on the employee-oriented use of people analytics (Köhne et al. 2024)</li> <li>– Special Issue “Organizing for Emerging Digital Technologies: The Good, the Bad &amp; the Ugly” in <i>Information and Organization</i></li> </ul>
Integrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create joint knowledge transfer formats (e.g., podcast series, entire blogs)</li> <li>– Start joint journals and conferences</li> <li>– Institutionalize interdisciplinary professorships and research centers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Interdisciplinary journal “Schmalenbach Journal of Business Research”</li> <li>– Interdisciplinary VHB biannual conference</li> <li>– Center for Digital Technology and Management (CDTM)</li> </ul>

value in these complementary orientations. OT can contribute critical reflection, societal grounding, ethical considerations and a stronger focus on theorizing to IS’s future-oriented approach, ensuring that responsible technological design does not reproduce harmful power dynamics or social inequalities (Young et al. 2024). At the same time, OT can learn from IS how to engage more proactively in shaping futures, by combining critique with normative aspirations and design engagement. IS, in turn, can deepen its reflection on the broader societal and organizational (ir)responsibility of the technologies, drawing from OT’s strong foundation in institutional and critical theory. For both fields, this means moving beyond their traditional orientations. A joint theorizing of the future of organizing with and around technology is needed—one that is simultaneously critical and constructive, reflective and interventionist.

To sum it up, OT is becoming more open to socio-technical perspectives and future-oriented engagement, while IS is deepening its critical reflexivity and expanding its understanding of institutional complexity. As technologies like GenAI, algorithms, and platforms increasingly shape the fabric of organizational life, a mutual learning process is essential. OT can engage more with technology’s material agency and emergent effects, while IS can incorporate power, ethics, and critique more deeply into its design efforts. Together, both fields can co-create a richer, more nuanced theorization of organizing in a digitally mediated world—one that is both reflective and transformative to drive impactful research on the (ir)responsibility in and through digitalization.

### 4.3 Building Bridges for Holistic Impact

OT and IS scholars interested in engaging in joint and impactful research into digital responsibility face a number of challenges, which go beyond the fault lines that were

outlined in the introduction to this essay collection, but also relate to the vocabulary each discipline uses to discuss digital responsibility and varying institutional and publishing norms. And yet, there are steps that scholars can take to navigate these challenges and build bridges between the two disciplines to create impact with their research. Next, we will present three steps to build bridges for holistic impact: inquire, involve, and integrate.

The first step—*inquire*—entails learning about and from each discipline’s language, assumptions, and traditions. This can be facilitated by reading articles and attending conferences on digital responsibility from the respective other discipline, as well as by purposefully inviting colleagues from the other discipline to research seminars and workshops on the topic. Knowing how each discipline approaches digital responsibility facilitates engagement of scholars from both disciplines in joint projects and enables moving to the next step.

The second step—*involve*—could mean collaborating on time-bound and low-risk projects with the aim of doing things together. Examples may be joint papers and special issues on digital responsibility, joint funding applications, and organizing joint research seminars and workshops on digital responsibility. In addition, experimenting could also mean engaging in joint knowledge exchange activities that can range from knowledge transfer to various forms of stakeholder engagement (see Table 4). The complementary strength of each discipline could be especially beneficial when engaging with stakeholders from business, civic society, and policy—for instance, when discussing how to govern GenAI in organizations in a responsible way. Through such experiments, scholars from OT and IS would start to develop a set of shared assumptions and vocabulary on digital responsibility that would facilitate a higher level of cooperation.

The third step—*integrate*—could involve scaling, sustaining, and institutionalizing successful experiments from the previous phase, for example, by creating a joint podcast series on digital responsibility. Even more ambitious would be developing an integrated research agenda and sustaining it through joint journals and conferences, and by securing funding for interdisciplinary professorships and interdisciplinary research centers. Realizing this step means institutionalizing a solid bridge between OT and IS.

Table 4 summarizes ideas for how to bring these three steps to life and shows examples of existing formats.

## 5 Conclusion

Digital technologies offer a wide opportunity space of potentialities for (ir)responsible impact. To leverage the potentialities for responsible impact and contain potentialities for irresponsible impact, OT and IS researchers play an important role. Both disciplines have their very own perspective and strengths that, put together, can leverage holistic impact. Their joint effort plays an important role in integrating all stakeholders of digitalization through their research, teaching, and practice. While the disciplines have already moved closer together, we need to expand this journey towards an effective interdisciplinary impact in and on digital responsibility.

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