The sociological perspective

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11th Annual Liability Regimes Conference

Keeping the Floodgates Shut? Mastering Accumulation and Bodily Injury Exposures in a Rapidly Changing Environment

4–5 November 2015, Rüschlikon
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Annual Liability Regimes Conference
Rüschlikon, Schweiz
In general, there is an overwhelming support for medical research and medical technology.

But there are exceptions.

- e.g. human embryo stem cell research
- some medical devices
Human Embryo Stem Cell Research

- One of the major controversies on technology at the turn of the century
  - The controversy was not based on judgements on risks or on a general rejection of technology but on
  - conflicting moral evaluations
    - Sanctity of life versus moral duty to develop new therapies
Medical Devices: Some Survey Results

Even if medical devices are similar from a technical point of view, public reactions are different.

Example: Computer Chip implants into the brain
Medical Devices: Some Survey Results

Eurobarometer 225: „Social Values, Science & Technology“

- Implanting into the brain a tiny computer chip that can give hearing back to deaf people.
  - 12% never

- Implanting into our brain a tiny computer chip that would improve memory.
  - 54% never

- In both cases, a computer chip is implanted into the brain but reactions are very different.
What are the reasons that make technologies unacceptable?

- Whether technologies are contested or not is the outcome of a societal process where social processes have to be studied.
- Technologies are not rejected because of inherent properties of the technology but for a number of other reasons which refer to the social context.
- What is perceived to be acceptable or not may change over time.
What are the reasons that make technologies unacceptable?

- Risks and benefits and their distribution

- What is the goal of the application?
  - Is it supported by society or not?
  - Are there interest conflicts within society?
  - Does the application interfere with major societal values?
    - See stem cell

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What are the reasons that make technologies unacceptable?

What is the societal context?

- Who takes the decision to use it and who is in charge of supervising the use?
  - People defend autonomy!
- If data are produced, are these data only accessible to the user or are they transferred to others?
  - The issue of data protection is highly controversial
- If actors beyond the individual user are involved, which level of trust do people have?
Thank You!