Learning from the de facto governance of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)

Abstract: Recently, the European Union has adopted the notion of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) as an integrative concept in virtue of the three-pillar ambition for the Horizon 2020 program: excellent science, competitive industry and addressing societal challenges (EP&C 2013). While it is clear that any governance strategy aiming for RRI has to account for tensions in the simultaneous pursuit of these policy goals, a pressing, still under-researched question is under which conditions such governance strategies can be mutually aligned and effective. In fact, many, if not all normative goals listed under the banner of RRI (or similar terms like responsible innovation or responsible development), are not new and already institutionalized in a vast and heterogeneous collection of governance arrangements. Think of evaluations of societal relevance for research, corporate responsibility schemes, health and environmental safety regulation, ethical reviews, stakeholder and public dialogue, education, open access instruments, sustainability policies, gender policies, etc. If the notion of RRI has to become really integrative, it has to be thought through from a governance perspective, which can take into account the various ways in which RRI is conditioned by these manifold modes and styles of governance.

In this paper we discuss important conceptual and methodological issues in tracing and analyzing typical factors conditioning the governance of RRI. We will do so by presenting a research heuristic for learning from the ‘de facto governance’ of RRI in both new and existing practices of RRI governance. This approach has been developed in the context of the FP7-project Res-AGorA, which aims to develop a (meta-)governance framework for RRI. The notion of de facto governance enables us to analyse the dynamics of governance processes as emerging from the dynamic interplay between (mostly organized) actors within and between organisations, their resources, interests and power, fora for debate and arenas for negotiation of the instruments applied in working towards legitimate objectives and outcomes (cf. Kuhlmann 2001, Benz 2006, Braun 2006). These dynamics can add up to certain patterns or de facto governance arrangements (cf. Rip 2010). The conceptual and methodological challenge is to come to a useful search strategy for capturing the relevant conditioning factors in the governance of RRI.

In the Res-AGorA project we have taken up this challenge in an iterative approach for conceptual development and empirical research. In the paper we discuss the three main conceptual steps of our approach and demonstrate its use by an analysis of governance practices of responsible innovation initiatives in the Netherlands, in particular in the field of nanotechnology.

As a first step we guide our search for lessons for the governance of RRI by characterize the main governance challenges identified in the current (policy) discourse on RRI. Typically, there is a search for prospective and collective accounts of responsibility, accompanied with
the need for deliberative and inclusive settings (cf. Von Schomberg 20xx and Owen et al. 2013). We argue that from a governance perspective, the particular challenges in this quest for responsible innovation can be clustered under the notions of ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘managing contestation’. By ‘responsibilisation’ we understand all factors that can exert influence on actors to take their responsibilities seriously (Dorbeck-Jung & Shelley-Egan 2013). Inextricably, ‘managing contestation’ seems to be a crucial challenge as the concept of RRI is contested and the pursuit of RRI is loaded with tensions about responsibilities and good practices. Whatever claims of responsibility come up, e.g. related to individual responsibilities or to the collective outcome or process of research and innovation, the way in which these are constructed, deliberated and negotiated, always involves polyvalent judgement, whether this is due to the future orientated character of RRI claims or to the sheer (social) complexity of many research and innovation processes.

In the second step we conceptualise a practice perspective for the governance of RRI. This step enables us to research those aspects that condition the realization of governance challenges identified in the first step, in real-world situations of de facto governance of RRI. To this end we position the notion of ‘de facto governance’ in relation to literature on research governance and theories of innovation in which important conditions for governance are conceived. In the third step we operationalize this governance practice perspective in a research model that is developed to investigate de facto RRI governance practices, taking into account the particular governance challenges of RRI. For this model a limited set of ‘descriptors’ is developed, specifying the conditioning factors we are looking for, while still able to account for the heterogeneity in RRI governance arrangements, processes and practices as situated in various settings of scientific and technological domains, political cultures, etc… Finally, we discuss criteria to assess the observed governance successes or failures.

In the paper we will demonstrate the use of our research model with findings from case studies conducted in the Netherlands, in particular in the field of nanotechnology, which has been figuring as a salient domain of RRI discourse and activities. In one case we will discuss how the deployment of a public policy model for risk governance is related to both governance successes and failures. In another case we analyse how the objective to integrate risk analysis and technology assessment into a large national research and innovation program is being pursued and shaped in its specific context. The reflection on these case studies lead to (very) preliminary lessons on conditions for good RRI governance and methodological and other issues for the further development of the research model.

Relevance to special session theme and Eu-SPRI conference
We would like to submit our contribution to the special session “Understanding and addressing the governance challenges of Responsible Research and Innovation” as we – partly represented in the organization of this session – think it well addresses the first goal of the session (improving the analytical understanding of the complex governance challenges posed by RRI in the field of STI) as well as in being framed as part of an overall approach to the second goal of the session (discussing promising approaches and methods with which the identified governance challenges can be addressed). Moreover, we think that our discussion of conceptual foundations for learning from de facto governance is of broader relevance to understanding the dynamics in STI policy and practice.
References


