Preface

Many years ago, in the early 2000s, I worked with children and young people’s use of new online technologies. Back then, the average adult population mainly knew the internet as a communications platform for emails, basic search and news. Younger generations, on the other hand, were quickly adopting the internet’s opportunities for self-expression and social networking as a digital extension of their everyday life. It was an online world for youth perceived by an adult generation as inaccessible, incomprehensible and secret. These were also the early years of the popularisation of an online privacy movement. Although it had existed in technical activist communities since the introduction of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, the privacy movement was increasingly also sieving into public awareness. Online privacy was considered a form of power that we could campaign for and tell citizens to demand by using privacy-enhancing technologies to protect ourselves against state and commercial tracking and surveillance. At one point I realised though that educating and raising awareness among the users of the internet was not enough. I became particularly concerned that youth’s initial experience of freedom away from adults’ prying eyes was actually just another form of control by other more invisible powerful actors, such as social media tech giants. What concerned me the most was these actors’ presence everywhere – at our events and meetings, in public consultations, in policy initiatives. It was as if their business design and model for the evolution of the Internet was the only formula possible. Therefore, I started focusing on alternatives to the very design and business models of these services inspired by the early critical voices in the field.

All along, civil society actors had worked to have human rights issues included on the official internet governance agenda in processes such as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and the UN Internet Governance Fora (IGF). However, it was not until 2013 that the United Nations General Assembly affirmed that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online (UN, 2013). Even then, in the more general business and public discourse, human rights online did not take a proper foothold. Human rights considerations, such as concerns regarding our rights to privacy and data protection, were often in public discourse described as obstacles to digital innovation, as old social norms that were preventing an unavoidable digital evolution of society. It was obvious that the very business and tech-
nology culture of the internet’s development was preventing a more ethically reflective and constructive debate. In 2014, I therefore established the Global Privacy as Innovation Network at the UN Internet Governance Forum, bringing together industry, human rights advocates and technology entrepreneurs to explore privacy as an opportunity rather than an obstacle.

At that time, data ethics was still not a layman’s term and the ethical implications of data technology and business were addressed in public debate – if addressed at all – in terms of privacy implications only. As such, it was still a great struggle for the lone privacy activist to walk into a public debate on social media and the digitalisation of society. Human rights issues of online business were considered an activist topic separate from the debates on big data innovation and disruption that were shaping online business development.

In 2015, I left the Danish Media Council where I had worked for 10 years in a national EU Awareness Centre on youth’s use of the internet and new technologies. Together with the former journalist Pernille Tranberg, I started exploring a growing movement among technology designers and emerging companies developing and promoting alternative data design and business models based on the preservation of privacy. We established the thinktank DataEthics together with two other women. At first it was like fighting with the most popular kid in school; we were the outsiders, the activists, who did not understand the awesomeness of this reckless kid and his shiny new tools. However, public discourse and awareness was also changing; in particular, the negotiations of the European General Data Protection Reform were increasingly addressed in public debate. Alongside a growing awareness and attention to the ethics of digital technology, the thinktank DataEthics became increasingly involved in the public debate as well as in business and the policy debate.

These years of immersion in the field have been integral to my understanding of the history and power dynamics that I explore in this book. I have seen a rising awareness of the role of the internet in society that increasingly included a view on risks and challenges beyond mere technical and functional issues. And I have seen how a focus on online privacy risks transformed into a more generally accepted awareness of data ethical implications and issues in the general public – violations of human dignity, the exposed vulnerable groups in society, discrimination and challenges to democracy and democratic institutions. This is also where I discovered a pattern of cultural powers; the distribution of power in culturally embedded socio-technical data systems, and not least the interests invested in the very term data ethics as an expression of power dynamics.