The practice of organizational social media - an international longitudinal case study

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Abstract

The last decade a broad stream of research has studied how organizations use specific social media platforms. However, there is a lack of research that focuses on a more general use of organizational social media over time, that includes social media use both for internal and external purposes, and what implications the use has on work practices and organizational structures. The aim of the present paper is hence to study the organizational use of social media in terms of what new work practices and organizational structures that emerge and changes over time. Orlikowski's 'practice lens' has been used to analyze the introduction and ongoing use of social media in a hotel chain over a period of five years. The main contribution of the paper is providing means to explain the new practices and structures related to organizational work that arises due to the use of organizational social media.

Keywords: organizational social media, practice lens, structuration, social media, hotel organizations

Introduction

The use of social media in organizations have in many ways transformed organizations (Deng et al, 2019; Aral, 2013) and have become a part of workplace activities (Rice and Leonardi, 2014). Compared to other information technologies (IT) used in an organizations, social media does not serve a explicit purpose (Kruse and Baumöl, 2016). That is, social media is flexible in form of use and its usefulness and value are dependent on how the user makes sense of it. Therefore, compared to earlier information system (IS), social media does not always have a predictable purpose in the workplace (Huang et al, 2015). The use of social media in organizations calls for changes in work practices, organizational structures, and routines (Koch et al, 2013). Aral et al. (2013: 3) also argue that "social media represent one of the most transformative impacts of information technology on business, both within and outside firm boundaries." A broad stream of research has the last decade studied how organizations use specific social media platforms, e.g. Twitter (see Paraise et al, 2013; Saffer et al, 2013) or Facebook (see Saxton and Waters, 2014; Larsson, 2018) or social media for internal use such as knowledge sharing (see Koch et al, 2013; Treem et al, 2015) or knowledge management (see Treem and Leonardi, 2013; and Leonardi, 2015). Another stream of research have investigated social media as a tool for external communication (see Zhang et al, 2016) or User-Generated content (Benthaus et al, 2016). That is, a large stream of social media studies have focused on a few key themes related to categories of use. Subsequently, there is need for research that focuses on a more general use of organizational social media that includes social media use both for internal and external purposes and its implications on organizational practices (Van Osch and Coursaris, 2013; Schlagwein and Hu, 2018). Van Osch and Coursaris (2013) point out that research in the area of social media has "largely ignored the more general use of social media by and within organizations" (p. 703). In addition, Högberg (2018), discuss the lack of studies in the Information System research field that focuses on a more general use of organizational social media. Van Osch and Coursaris (2013, p 74) also offers a broader definition of social media use in organizations and define organizational social media (OSM) as:

> technology artefacts, both material and virtual, that support various intra- and extra-organizational actors— including management, employees and external stakeholders—in a multiplicity of organizational

communication activities for producing user-generated content, developing and maintaining social relationships, or enabling other computer-mediated interactions and collaborations in the context of a specific organization and its environment.

It is not yet clear why so many organizations use social media and what implications the more general use of social media has on the organization. Therefore, there is lack of understanding of the organizational challenges surrounding social media use (Durkin et al., 2013; Forsgren and Byström, 2018), and a lack of empirical illustrations on how social media produce new organizational behavior (Aral et al., 2013; Van Osch and Coursaris, 2013; Schlagwein and Hu, 2018). That is to say, there is a need for an in-depth understanding that focuses on more general organizational social media use practices in order to examine how employees and organizations structure and organize these practices in the workplace. The present paper aims to address the above described research gap and provide empirical understanding by studying the organizational use of social media in terms of what new work practices and organizational structures that emerge and changes over time. Hence, the paper seeks an answer to the following question: *How does the use of organizational social media create new organizational work practices and structures over time?* In order to achieve the aim and research question, the present paper is based upon a longitudinal qualitative case study of an international hotel chain that uses organizational social media. The hotel chain was chosen due to the fact that they were late adopters of organizational social media, not introducing it until 2013, and because there was an opportunity to follow the use over time. Orlikowski's practice lens (2000) will be used as point of departure to analyze the international hotel chains introduction and ongoing use of social media. Orlikowskis (2000; p.420) practice lens "allows us to see what, when, where, how, and why different groups enact different structures (technologies-in-practice) through their recurrent interaction with a particular set of technological properties in similar and different contexts at the same time and over time." Furthermore, from the practical lens, the concept of 'technology-in-practice' is used in order to investigate how *technology structures- facilities, norms* and *interpretive schemes* related to organizational social media use develops over time. The main contribution of the paper is providing means to explain the new practices and structures related to organizational work that emerge over time due to the use of organizational social media.

Related Research: Organizational Social Media

Social media has become an important research topic in several research fields, such as organizational communication, marketing, advertising and public relations. Earlier research has often categorized social media depending on whether it is used for internal or external activities. A large stream of social media research have focused on internal social media use, often referred to as Enterprise Social Media (ESM) (Van Osch and Coursaris, 2013; Högberg, 2018). Social media used for internal communication and knowledge sharing is often referred to as enterprise social media (ESM) (Leonardi and Treem, 2013). Initially, studies on ESM focused on individual social media platforms such as blogs (e.g Efimova and Grudin, 2007), microblogging (e.g. Schmidt, 2007; Zhao and Rosson, 2007) or wikis (e.g. Majchrzak et al ,2006). More recent research have however focused more on multiple ESM use. E.g Turner et al (2010) investigated how social media complemented existing organizational IT while Mäntymäki, Riemer (2016) studied how employees use ESM and the value they ascribe the use. Theories of knowledge management is broadly used when describing organizational use of social media. Von Krogh (2012) studied how knowledge management activities can be improved with social media platforms. Leonardi (2014) studied motives for why employees don't want to share knowledge through social media. Furthermore, a number of studies highlight the transparency that social media platforms brings and its effects on internal communication and knowledge sharing in organizations (cf. Fulk and Yuan, 2013; Leonardi, 2015; Huang et al., 2015). In contrast, social media used by organizations for external communication often goes under the term Public Social Media and refers to external social media use, e.g. for mass communication with an external audience or other organizations. A broad stream of research have focused on Social Media Marketing (SMM) that is marketing activities conducted by organizations through social media platforms (Minazzi, 2015). Studies focusing on organizational use of social media for external purposes is less common in the IS research field (Van Osch and Coursaris, 2013; Högberg, 2018). Some studies have focused on social media use for stakeholder engagement (e.g. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012); Lu et al., 2015; Zhang et al. 2016). Another broad stream of research have focused on User-Generated Content (UCG) and word of mouth enabled by social media and

how it can be used by customers to share information about organizations and their products and services (e.g. Benthaus et al. 2016; Ismagilova et al; 2017). Earlier research on social media use in the hospitality industry, which is the context of the present study, has put a large emphasis on customers increased use of online reviews and the management of User Generated Content. E.g. Baka (2016) investigated USG in relation to reputation management and the consequences of managing online reviews. Sparks and Brownings (2011) study exposed that hotel guests largely determined what hotel to book depending on ratings in online reviews and comments from other quests. Researchers have also investigated how hotel organisations use social media. Escobar-Rodríguez and Carvajal-Trujillo (2013) studied hotel and the relationship between the size of the hotel and their social media strategy. Similarly, Haro de Rosario et al. (2013) examined the use of social media by the world's 50 largest hotel chains, and revealed that the size and age of the hotel chain influenced the use of social media. However, more recently, researchers has been critical towards the fragmented perspective taken by earlier research, focusing merely on the individual social media perspective. The main argument behind the critique is that the organizational use of social media in the IS research field has focused to a large extent on individuals as level of analysis and their acceptance and use of social media. Hence researchers argue that the research field of organizational use of social media is still in its infancy (Aral et al., 2013; Van Osch and Coursaris, 2013; Högberg, 2018).

Theoretical Framework: A Practice Lens

The IS research field has a long tradition of studying the role of IT in organizations and how it can change existing work practices (Volkoff et al., 2007; Ellway and Walsham, 2015; Schultze and Orlikowski, 2004). The *technology-in-practice* perspective (Orlikowski, 2000), also called the *practice lens* for studying technology use in organizations, focuses on "emergent technology structures enacted in practice rather than embodied structures fixed in technologies" (p. 408). Orlikowski (2000: 404) suggests that by seeing the usage of technology as a process of enactment, one can develop a deeper understanding of "the constitutive role of social practices in the ongoing use and change of technology in the workplace." According to Orlikowski, the use of technology is what individuals do with a technological artefact in their repeated, situated practices such as work practices. Hence, the use of technology includes "a repeatedly experienced, personally ordered and edited version of the technological artefact, being experienced differently by different individuals and differently by the same individuals depending on the time or circumstance. In this aspect, it may be termed a *technology-in-practice*, to refer to the specific structure routinely enacted as we use the specific machine, technique, appliance, device, or gadget in recurrent ways in our everyday situated activities" (pp. 408–9). This notion is especially interesting when studying social media since, as noted above, it was not originally designed to be used in an organizational setting and consists of constantly developing and changeable algorithms to which the user must adapt. The practice lens has been widely used in IS research. Mansour and Askenäs (2013) analyzed the use of wikis within two international organizations by using the practice lens. They found a number of enacted structures that reflect diverse wiki use practices. Similarly, Berger (2015) studied networking practices between industrial actors and their stakeholders. Kwauy et al (2018) explored the influence of social media platforms on organizational practices by using the practice perspective. The study revealed that different types of social media platforms play different roles in creating different strategizing methods. The findings reveals that social media is influencing competitiveness through both imitation and product development.

Research Method

The research design of the present paper involves an in-depth single qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2003). A case study design was used since it is appropriate when investigating a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin, 2003: 13). The case study is longitudinal as data was collected over a period of five years (2013-2018) within an international hotel chain. The hotel chain was considered appropriate since it was just in the beginning of their social media implementation process. The studied hotels all belong to the same hotel chain and are located in seven European countries.

Data collection

In the present paper, a combination of multiple qualitative data collection methods has been used. As such, the empirical data in this paper was obtained through interviews, field visits, observation and organizational documents. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data source of the study (cf. Walsham, 2006) and

the basis for the analysis. Key respondents at the hotel chain and local hotels were identified based on the criterion of their actual use of social media in each organization and in the hotel chain head offices. In total, 40 interviews were collected over the five-year period at the hotel organizations, with 34 interviews conducted at the hotels and six interviews conducted over skype. The interviews lasted about 60 and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The initial interviews was conducted during 2013-2014 and on the respondents' actual use of social media at each hotel, and how social media related to other work tasks and organizational routines. The interviews with the social media manager and e-commerce managers focused on the hotel chain's social media strategy and how their policies were used and spread throughout the organization and what kind of policies they used. The interviews followed a semi-structured procedure (Kvale, 1996) and began with a discussion of the respondents' work tasks and use of social media in their workplace and questions like "Can you describe how your hotel uses social media?" were asked. The respondents were also asked to reflect on the value of using social media at the hotels. These questions were asked in order to understand social media was actually used in the studied organizations, which is the technology-in-use (Orlikowski, 2000). During the following years (2014-2018), 11 follow-up interviews were conducted as well as interviews with new organizational members in new positions such as social media content manager and regional social media manager. The follow-up interviews focused on questions like: "can you describe how you work with social media today and what changes you have made?" By regularly conducting interviews and making observations at the studied hotels, important insights was given for example how the hotel chain changed its management of social media and organizational structure and what implications this had for the hotel organizations. Upon collecting data through semi-structured interviews, data have been collected from netnography observation (Kozinetz, 2010) of the hotels social media activities in social media platforms e.g Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. These online observations were made to gain more insight into how the hotels use social media and provided insights on what type of content was published and how the hotels interacted with customers. Therefore, the perspective of organizational social media (Van Osch and Coursaris, 2013) was used when doing the online observations, that is, observations were made both in platforms managed by the hotels themselves, e.g. Facebook but also in third-party platforms such as TripAdvisor. Furthermore, written documents such as social media guidelines and policies were a source of empirical data. By using multiple data sources selected during a longitudinal period for studying the same phenomenon (Yin, 2003) the validity of the study was improved.

Analysis

The empirical data analysis, was guided by a set of concepts from Orlikowskis (2000) 'practice lens'. Concepts such as "facilities*,*" "norms" and "interpretive schemes" were used (see Table 1). The first step in the analysis was to read the transcripts to develop an understanding of the actual use (technology-in-use) of social media at the hotels. In order to understand the emergence of new organizational structures and changes over time, a timeline was made. The development of new organizational structures, norms, hierarchies and new organizational roles such as regional social media managers could thus be identified and tracked in time. By going back and forth through the data, an understanding of the data was created, using open coding processes (Cole and Avison, 2007). Throughout the process of analyzing the empirical data, the emergence of new work practices and organizational structures was found, which was summarized in two categories: 1) development of new work practices and the use of new facilities, 2) interpretations of social media use at work and 3) emergence of new organizational structures and hierarchies, which will be further developed in the following section.

Theoretical Concepts	Empirical data – technology-in-practice	Data sources
"facilities"	Social media platforms used, supportive IT, e.g. Google analytics and software	Interviews, workplace observations, online observations, written documents

"norms"	descriptions of social media use e.g. organizational routines, and descriptions of "does and don'ts" in policies and strategies	Interviews, workplace observations, online observations, written documents
"interpretive schemes"	Assumptions, expectations and feelings of the social media use in the workplace	Interviews
Technologies-in-Practice	Individuals actual use (practice) of the technology artefact	Interviews, workplace observations, online observations, written documents
Organizational Structures	Technology-in-practice enact with other organizational structures such as work tasks hierarchies	Interviews, workplace observations, written documents

Table 1 – Theoretical concepts used in the analytical process

Findings and Analysis

Development of New Work Practices and the Use of New Facilities

In 2013, the hotel chain decided to start using social media. This included using social media at a brand level but also that the individual hotels within the hotel chain were allowed to use social media. As a starting point, a social media manager was hired at the hotel chain's headquarters to develop guidelines for the entire chain. Furthermore, an e-commerce manager was hired offering training in social media activities and connecting the hotels' online sales activities with social media activities. The work practices that arose from social media use were related to a number of tasks such as return on investment, data analytics, advertising and customer relationship management. Numerous employees with specific competence were hence involved in the ongoing use of social media. These employees were structured in specific departments on a hotel chain level. Furthermore, new technologies have been introduced to support and manage social media work practices, e.g. the software here referred to as "Circus" that give alerts whenever the hotels gets a review that needs to be answered. The structuring of social media use was divided into international and regional levels focusing on different parts of social media use. The international social media manager focused on hotel chain-level use of social media involving the hotel brand. However, the regional managers developed strategies for marketing the individual hotels on a local market in collaboration with the regional e-commerce managers. The social media presence caused a need for new work roles and practices that challenged earlier organizational structures and hierarchies. For example, the online reviews published both in the hotels' own social media channels but also on third party channels such as TripAdvisor were in great need of management and did not fall under the reception desk's work tasks as did other customer complaints, but instead ended up at the employee responsible for social media presence at the individual hotels. Hence, existing organizational hierarchies and authorities were challenged and rearranged due to the technology-in-practice (Orlikowski, 2000). The employees in charge of social media at each hotel were involved with a range of activities related to social media ranging from online booking to posting pictures and answering online reviews. The software "Circus" was used in order to get alerts whenever the hotels got a review on other social media platforms or were mentioned e.g. on a blog. In addition, "Circus" was used to schedule social media posts.

One of the e-commerce managers, Trey, explains the value of measuring social media activities in 2017 by saying:

> Social media is nothing but an equation. We use it to find out how we can sell as many
> rooms as possible at the highest profit. It's an ecosystem of social media channels and

> each channel can follow the entire customer journey…. Social media provides us with a lot of data. I'm very numbers driven, so I need to see it as an equation, is it going to be a success or will it not be a success? Also, when we have am equation we can narrow down the activity of a campaign if it is sticking to the plan that we had. I think this is going to be the new thing.

This quote illustrates the necessity of managing the big data that can be collected from social media, but also the ability of measuring both the hotel chains and the individual hotels as well as customer activities in social media. Hence the facilities (Orlikowski, 2000), that is, the social media platforms created a need for supportive software systems that could help the employees to structure their social media use.

Interpretations of Social Media at Work

During the five years of the study, the individual employees and the hotel chain management showed different interpretive schemes (Orlikowski, 2000) concerning the usefulness of social media. During 2013-2015 all individual hotels managed their own social media presence and had employees that were in charge of the social media channels. This resulted in very different ways of using social media at the hotels. For example, the hotels used different social media channels or facilities (Orlikowski, 2000), often depending on the employees private use of social media. That is, employees that used Facebook in their private lives choose to use Facebook at work as well. While the hotel chain management interpreted that social media should be used for marketing and sales activities, the individual hotels and their employees were critical this approach. Carl exemplifies this by saying:

> Sure, the managers [social media managers] gives us a little instructions on what to post, what to write and those kind of things. To be honest, I don't really use them. I also think it is frustrating that they want us to post campaigns for the hotel chain, I mean I just want to focus on my own hotel. And also, I think it is so boring with advertising on Facebook.

Due to the different interpretations of social media use the hotel chain management took actions to create a more common understanding. In 2015, the hotel chain rearranged the social media strategy and e.g. started an enterprise blog in order to create a more streamlined social media use within the hotels. The employees use of social media revealed a clear discrepancy both in terms of the quality of the posts published in social media channels but also the individual employees interpretation of the value and usefulness of social media. The employees expressed that they were aware of the benefits that social media could bring when interacting with customers, but also expressed negative attitudes towards the obligatory use of social media and the lack of time and resources. The different interpretative schemes (Orlikowski, 2000) resulted in that formal policies, organizational norms were ignored, and the employees used social media in ways that suited their current work situation.

Emergence of New Organizational Structures and Hierarchies

Due to that the employees ignored the formal strategies and policies during the five years, new structures emerged. These structural changes emerged as a direct result of the discrepancy in interpretative schemes (Orlikowski, 2000) between the hotel chain management and individual employees and the individual employees' technology- in- use (Orlikowski, 2000). In 2017, after four years of trying decentralized use of social media, the hotel chain made a radical change in how to manage and structure the use of social media. The decision to centralize social media was taken due to the discrepancy between what the hotel chain management strategically wanted to use social media and how the employees used social media. One essential reason for enacting this kind of structures was the hotel chain managements perceived need for control the social media use. The social media management is structured in five levels: the social media manager (hotel chain head office), regional social media manager (e.g. northern Europe), social media content manager (e.g. smaller parts of northern Europe), regional social media managers (e.g. hotels within a specific country) and social media champions at the individual hotels. The restructuring of organizational structure resulted in a top-down approach with high management control of what was published and said in social media related to the hotel brand. In practice this implied that the individual hotels were no longer

allowed to be in charge of their social media channels. All social media channels besides Facebook were shut down and the publishing and content production were managed from the social media management offices. The individual hotels got to have "social media champions," employees who volunteered to take pictures, suggest social media content to the social media content manager, and answer online reviews, but who were not, however, allowed to post anything on social media platforms. Wilma, one of the regional social media managers, explains:

> I am responsible for four hotels. Although I am responsible for social media for those hotels I can honestly say that I don't prioritize it. It is difficult since I am not present at the different hotels. Some hotels have a social media champion but some hotels have chosen not to have one, they don't want to. At some hotels the champions are really good but at other hotels the management has just told them that "now you're the social media champion" — just so you know.

This major change in the organizational structure thus created a centralized, hierarchical, top-down approach concerning social media use and reveals the need for management control of social media content. Hence, the practice of social media in an organizational context is highly affected by the content and the implications publishing or managing content in the wrong way can have for an organizational brand. Also, individual employees' interpretations of social media had implications for and affected the practice, driving the organizational restructuring from decentralized social media use to centralization. Hence, the way policies were made by the social media manager, which were fairly vague in the beginning, had effects on the structuring and use of social media in the individual hotels, which led to a discrepancy in hotel chain strategy and the actual ongoing use (Orlikowski, 2000). A large emphasis was put on creating policies on how to use social media, hence this is arguably one of the most important instruments that enabled and influenced the structuring of social media use. The policies can be related to organizational culture and norms (Orlikowski, 2000) and the empirical data illustrates that how these were developed by the hotel chain management had an impact on structuring the use of technology in the individual hotels. The empirical data also illustrates that organizational norms and rules were developed when the hotel chain management was dissatisfied with the social media use in individual hotels. Hence, individuals with higher rank in the organizational hierarchy were highly influential when affecting the hotel chain social media management. In other words, the technology-in-use (Orlikwoski, 2000) highly effected how the organizational hierarchies and structures developed over time.

Conclusions

The present paper has studied an international hotel chain's introduction and ongoing use of organizational social media. The purpose of the present paper was to understand how the ongoing use of organizational social media creates new practices and structures within organisations. The analysis presented in this paper illustrates a number of technologies-in-practice, and how the hotel chain structured and managed the social media use and the consequences of the social media use over time. Furthermore, the findings illustrate that the use of social media in an organizational context creates new work practices, new work roles, and new organizational structures and hierarchies. Hence, the present paper addresses the calls for more research on organizational social media (Van Osch and Coursaris, 2013), and on how organizations are transformed due to the social media use (Aral et al., 2013). Furthermore, the paper contributes to the literature on a more general social media use in organizations by illustrating how the practice of social media use over time takes place in organizations. The study illustrates how the facilities (Orlikowski, 2000), the different social media technologies and their use, create new work practices both on a hotel chain management level and in the individual hotels. That is, both the micro and macro levels of the hotel chain's organizational structure are affected. Due to individual interpretations (Orlikowski, 2000), the social media policies and norms were ignored and informal norms and routines were created at the individual hotels. This created a discrepancy between the hotel chain management's social media strategy and the technology-in-use at each hotel. Eventually this led to new organizational structures and hierarchies, and also work tasks in order to control the social media use. The features of social media, (Van Osch and Coursaris, 2013) such as the possibility for users to create online reviews, also created a need for new knowledge, but most of all, new work routines. This is due to the heavy use of e.g. TripAdvisor among the customers which also reflects social media use in the specific context of hospitality. The present study also contributes practically by

illustrating the organizational media use in a large, international hotel chain and its social media management over time and the organizational changes that emerged from it. The study has several limitations. First of all, it is a case study of one hotel chain and 14 hotels, which makes it difficult to generalize the results. Second, the theoretical framework of Orlikowski's (2000) practice lens has offered one way to study the use of social media in organizations. However, other theoretical frameworks can move beyond the focus of understanding technology use and focus on the social media artefact. The present study also gives important practical contribution by exposing how organisations use social media over time and what new work practices and organizational structures are developed.

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