Abstract

The introduction of IT-enabled collaborative tools such as Enterprise Social Media (ESM) has brought new forms of organizational collaboration to the forefront. We introduce social fabric as a theoretical frame to reveal how ESM can become part-and-parcel of the social environment in which organizational members interact and collaborate. Drawing on Bruno Latour’s cartography of controversies, we present novel empirical insights from a case study of the ESM platform Yammer in an IT consultancy company. Our analysis uncovers four threads of the social fabric: ‘public-private context’, ‘social-professional content’, ‘praise-reprimands giving ratio’ and ‘noise-news perception’ that characterize the interactions between the organizational members and how collaboration is woven on the respective ESM platform. The findings show that delineating the emerging threads of the social fabric can help tracing the progress of different collaborative initiatives on ESM platforms and anticipating their success.

Keywords: Enterprise Social Media, Social Fabric, Collaboration, Latour’s Cartography of Controversies
Introduction

Collaboration is social by nature because it requires a joint coordinated effort of individuals or groups across certain boundaries. The proliferation of IT-enabled collaborative tools such as Enterprise Social Media (ESM) alters the social fabric of organizations and thereby transforms, ipso facto, the essence of collaboration at work. In an organizational context, collaboration relies on the establishment and creation of social relationships and interactions among individuals and groups (Avital and Singh 2011). As ESM platforms become an integrated part of organizational members’ daily activities, they alter how social relationships and interactions are being formed within organizations (Leonardi et al. 2013). Therefore, in order to understand the prospects of ESM and the role that they can play in organizations, we must move beyond studying the functionalities and outcome of using ESM technologies, towards understanding the social premise that these media create within the organization. In this paper, we contribute to the current knowledge base on collaboration and ESM through an investigation of the social fabric that is woven when ESM are adopted into an organizational context.

Collaboration can be characterized as the process of individuals working together to perform a certain task or to achieve a common goal (Smith and McKeen 2011). IT-enabled collaborative tools have proved to play an important role in support of joint initiatives (Zhang et al. 2011). Fostering group collaboration and teamwork, IT-enabled collaborative tools allow individuals to work together in new ways (Alavi 1994). The role of such tools in organizational practices is evident from the first generation IT systems that enable file sharing and recovery to today’s systems that promote interactive coordination and knowledge creation (Reimer and Scifleet 2012). As an IT-enabled collaborative technology, ESM are designed to encourage the development of communities of practice and to stimulate the ‘knowing experience’ rather than merely transferring knowledge (Brivot 2011). In particular, ESM emphasize dynamic social relations as a driver of interaction and promote work that builds on the social network of the organization (Leonardi et al. 2013).

Recently, researchers and practitioners alike have been giving increasing attention to the role of ESM technologies in organizations, and in particular, to the range of opportunities that ESM technologies can provide in support of organizational knowledge sharing and collaboration (Leonardi et al. 2013; Treem and Leonardi 2012). ESM technologies can mitigate common areas of concern in organizations, such as deficient information sharing and coordination, by adding a dynamic shared space that promotes increased linkages between organizational members. Zammuto et al. (2007) describe how it is crucial to consider information systems when we talk about the changing fabric of the organization. Extending the view on ESM, by considering how it becomes part of the social fabric of the organization, can add to an understanding of the interactions that form the basis for organizational practices, such as collaboration, in today’s organizations.

Social fabric portrays the foundation upon which individuals interact and engage with each other. In sociology, the term social fabric is used to describe the underlying threads of interaction among individuals that together form their social life (Latour 2005). The introduction of new IT-enabled collaborative tools such as ESM provides an opportunity to re-examine the nature of collaboration at work. In this study, we investigate how the introduction and use of ESM as an organizational practice can foster a social fabric that supports collaborative efforts in an organization. We pursue two research questions:

1) What characterizes the social fabric of interactions between organizational members who use enterprise social media? and 2) What is the role of the social fabric in collaborative efforts on enterprise social media?

To address these questions, we present findings from an in-depth qualitative case study of the use of the ESM platform, Yammer, in an IT consultancy company. Here we observe how the ESM tool has become part of a social fabric that upholds the workings and the in situ dynamic practices of the organizational members. We decipher how the social fabric threads are spun through the ongoing interactions among organizational members on the platform. The findings show that delineating the emerging threads of the social fabric can help tracing the progress of different collaborative initiatives on ESM platforms and anticipating their success or lack thereof.

Next we outline the theoretical foundations of the study. We then present the methodological assumptions and the approach to data collection and analysis. The subsequent analysis addresses the two
research questions and provides a step-by-step account of our findings revealing the social fabric of the case organization and the role that the social fabric plays in support of collaborative efforts on the ESM platform. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings and make suggestions for further research.

Theoretical Foundation

Given that the study is designed to examine the potential role of the social fabric in collaboration on ESM platforms, we first review the literature on collaboration linked to ESM and then introduce the concept of social fabric. We also present Latour’s (2005) analysis of controversies, which we utilized to reveal the social fabric that emerges as part of the use of ESM as an IT-enabled collaborative tool.

Collaboration and Enterprise Social Media

Much attention has been attributed to collaboration as a source of the ability of organizations to respond to complexities at work and to act in a changing environment (Avital and Singh 2011). In inter-organizational collaborations, the differences between organizations in terms of knowledge, skills, and resources are leveraged by collaborative efforts, enabling the development of solutions to complex problems (Hardy et al. 2005; Gray 1989). The benefits of collaboration are found in the increased participation and information sharing among individuals, which encourages the organization to become responsive and agile (Veneeva 2006). While collaboration can be beneficial for the organization, it requires some effort to sustain collaborative efforts both within and between organizations (Kumar and van Dissel 1996).

In an organizational context, collaboration can be characterized as the process of individuals working together to perform a certain task or to achieve a common goal (Smith and McKeen 2011). Organizational collaborative learning is directly tied to social processes that enable individuals and groups to work together (Alavi 1994). Consequently, an understanding of collaboration is achieved through an investigation of the shared actions among individuals (Gladstein 1984). Collaboration is a mode of interaction among individuals and a way to coordinate the relationships that are formed in a collective when individuals or groups orient their behavior towards a certain goal (Avital and Singh 2011). It is in the workings of collaborative communities that the support of horizontal coordination and collaborative action allow for the exchange of ideas (Adler et al. 2008). In the coordination of these relationships, IT-enabled collaborative tools are to an increasing extent utilized in many organizations.

While investigating how information technology influences collaboration is not a new topic within IS research (e.g., see Olsen and Myers 1999; Sanders 2007; Gal et al. 2014), the approach to it has changed with the appearance of social technology (Faraj et al. 2011; Ma and Agarwal 2007; Lazar and Preece 2002). As an IT-enabled collaborative tool, ESM provide the basis for the formation of relationships that enable individuals to come together across organizational and social boundaries. Collaboration on social media has been described in terms of the promotion of two stages: the creation stage, where information is developed and shaped, and the retention stage, in which collaboration is preserved and refined (Ransbotham and Kane 2011). ESM are often referred to as second-generation knowledge management systems designed to encourage the development of communities of practice and to stimulate the ‘knowing experience’ rather than merely transferring knowledge (Brivot 2011). Through the added opportunities for communication and ongoing dialogue between all members of the platform, ESM put emphasis on social relationships, conversation and ad-hoc social sharing (Reimer and Scifleet 2012; Richter and Reimer 2009).

ESM are unique in their ability to communicate messages both to specific individuals and broadly to everyone in the organization. The broad communication is enabled by the open and perpetual display of all communication (Treem and Leonardı 2012). This increased visibility appears to be exactly where ESM are making a big impact on organizations. While media such as email, chat, and telephone conversations are preserved between the invited members, the interactions on the ESM are at most times shared across the entire organization, allowing everyone to see and follow what is going on (Cross et al. 2003). Previously, many organizational interactions have been invisible, but they are now performed in the open, adding a new layer of visibility and transparency. While previous studies of ESM have highlighted the
benefits in terms of collaborative action, our understanding requires a closer look at what is forming the foundation for such collaborative activities on the platform.

The consideration of the information technologies at play is crucial when we talk about the changing fabric of the organization (Zammuto et al. 2007). Consequently, the adoption of ESM technologies has an inevitable effect on the social fabric that forms the basis for collaboration within the organization. In the literature, social fabric has been used to define and articulate social change (Natarajan et al. 2009; Hayden 2006; Hayden 1986), to design and evaluate policies (Gill 1996), to measure performance and satisfaction of individuals (Baldwin et al. 1997), to uncover social tensions and risk (Enander et al. 2010; Short 1984), to describe the links between infrastructure and technological aspects of the urban order (Pflieger et al. 2008) and to describe social transformation (Venturini 2010). Used for unfolding large institutional systems and norms as well as small processes and interactions, the term social fabric serves as a means to untangle the social change and to explain the environment in which social interactions and relationships are formed and shaped.

In our study, we build on Venturini and Latour (2010) who use social fabric to portray the shared basis upon which individuals interact and engage with each other. Subsequently, we define social fabric as a fuzzy construct that refers to the prevailing beliefs and norms that regulate the relationships among people in a collective. Social fabric comprises the threads of relationships between individuals as well as the relationships between individuals and a respective group at large. The evolving beliefs and norms that regulate the relationships between people are reflected in their behaviors and narratives that can be observed, expressed, and experienced. Investigating how the social fabric is formed on ESM allows us to understand the relationships and interactions that forge the basis of collaboration on the technical platform.

**Revealing Social Fabric through Controversies**

To study the social fabric, we utilize Latour’s (2005) analysis of controversies, which reveals the threads of interactions between individuals and how these threads are woven together to shape social life. The controversy analysis can help us understand the processes that form social fabric on the ESM platform. Controversies are part-and-parcel of the social world and it is through the negotiations that we form our social existence. This makes controversies suitable for observing the social world and its making (Latour 2005). In relation to the study of digital media, Latour’s cartography of controversies (Venturini 2010) allows for the inclusion of technology as an actor. The point is to place no limit on what is observed but to look at the controversies and how they unfold in an arena of diverse actors. Controversies help us capture states of both stability and change as well as to describe how they contribute to the assembling and reassembling of the social fabric that ties people together (Venturini and Latour 2010).

Controversies are described as situations in which actors disagree (Venturini 2010). The disagreements do not have to reach a state of open fights, but they are often an example of clashing worlds that must come together in the creation of a shared universe (Venturini 2010). The life cycle of a controversy starts when actors realize that they cannot ignore each other, and they end when some form of agreement is reached among the involved parties. This agreement is often manifested in a compromise that is reached between the two or more actors taking part in the controversy (Venturini 2010). A controversy focuses on the negotiations that occur among all kinds of actors. This implies a revelation of the dynamic interplay between diverse actors where it is often also possible to observe new alliances being formed. In controversies, no existing assembly can be taken for granted, and the observer must therefore look at the interactions to see what relationships emerge (Latour 2005). Controversies appear when issues, that were otherwise perceived as taken for granted, are questioned repeatedly by more and more actors (Venturini 2010). In this sense, looking for controversies is a way of observing and describing a complex social world as it plays out in the disagreements between different actors.

Going about analyzing controversies is in Latour’s words to “just look at controversies and tell what you see” (Venturini 2010 p.259). However, if we examine Latour’s cartography of controversies (Venturini 2010; Venturini and Latour 2010), we find a few more clues as to how to go about working with controversies. Documenting a controversy entails the ongoing process of describing its lifecycle through five observational lenses. The first lens has to do with mapping the controversy by identifying the full extent of the controversy arena with regard to the relations that are involved, the discourses, and the core
statements that are circulating around the controversy (Venturini 2010). The second lens involves a closer look at the web of relations by identifying the different actors that make up the relations and by identifying their roles (Venturini 2010). According to Latour, an actor is anything doing something in the context of the controversy, and both human and nonhuman actors can play equally important roles (Latour 2005). A way of testing whether an actor plays a role in the controversy is to reflect on the difference it would make if this actor was not present. Only if it makes a difference, then the actor is playing a part in the relation. The third lens involves broadening the scope from actors to their network (Venturini 2010). The constant tying and retrying of connections in the network is part of describing the work and the flow of the actors, which outlines the shaping of the social environment. The fourth lens focuses on the shift from controversy to stability among actors and networks (Venturini 2010). The underlying assumption here is that the actors that drive the controversies will also pursue the establishment of stability through a compromise, which will be manifested in a form of agreement that settles the disagreement. The fifth lens deals with the establishment of a common ground among the actors to arrive at a certain social order (Venturini 2010). The newly established social order will hold intact as long as the respective actors keep constructing and reconstructing it. Each of the five lenses of observation adds a layer of understanding to the controversy and helps revealing the threads of interactions between individuals that make up the social fabric.

IT-enabled collaborative technologies provide a new opportunity to track and capture the controversies that make up the social fabric of organizations (Venturini and Latour 2010). The application of such technologies offers an opportunity to restructure the way we study the social interactions and the interplay between individuals (Rogers 2004). IT-enabled collaborative tools such as ESM are conducive to capturing collective action in-the-making through the recording of social interactions, social structures, and traces of coordinated work (Venturini and Latour 2010). Consequently, the controversy analysis can be used to reveal the social fabric and follow its development. Our definition outlines social fabric as a fuzzy construct that refers to the prevailing beliefs and norms that regulate the relationships among people in a collective. The controversy analysis serves as a solid approach to studying the relationships among individuals and the group at large as well as to uncovering the threads of interaction between these individuals that comprise the social fabric.

Research Setting and Approach

The data for this study are gathered in a Danish IT consultancy company, utilizing the ESM technology Yammer. The company currently has 41 employees and specializes in consultancy services within Microsoft SharePoint solutions, assisting large international companies. Most employees are based in client offices and work from there on a daily basis. Yammer was adopted as a tool for internal collaboration and communication in the summer of 2012 at the initiative of the new CEO. Until then the company had relied on communication sources such as email and the company intranet. Through its affiliation with Microsoft products, the company not only uses Yammer for its own internal communication but also sells it to its clients.

Yammer is an enterprise social media tool enabling collaboration through a platform that lets employees connect with each other, share information across teams and organize projects (Yammer, 2014). The Yammer platform encourages social networking between employees of the organization through functionalities such as the AllCompany news feed, where all information is communicated through posts and comments. In the case company, the Yammer platform is used for communication of all operational information from management as well as for the employees to share knowledge, files, experiences, social input, etc. The company has adopted an ad-hoc approach to the use of the Yammer platform by encouraging employees to join and engage on the media as they see fit. In 2013, the company was given an award as the best workplace, and the CEO attributed part of the reason for this to the Yammer platform and the social interactions that it facilitated.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection is based on a qualitative approach. We employed a variety of data sources in order to capture the interactions on the Yammer platform and its surrounding use. First, we registered all the organizational members’ entries on Yammer, dating back to the first interactions on the platform in June 2012. We were able to collect a total of 1,997 posts and their respective comments from the Yammer
platform. Second, we conducted participant observation of online and offline work at the case company. In practice, this meant that entire workdays were spent by one of the researchers at the company, working at a desk while observing and talking to organizational members. The time spent in the company amounted to 163 hours of onsite observations. Online observations were carried out on the Yammer platform over a period of three months in line with the onsite observations. Obtaining a personal login to the Yammer platform allowed us to follow the interactions between the employees on the platform. All the observations, both offline and online, were captured in systematic field notes following each observation session (Schultze 2000). Third, interviews were set up with employees at the company based on their interactions on the platform. The interviews were designed to produce rich accounts of the activities on Yammer. The interviews were conducted with organizational members across the company, including management, HR, marketing, sales, solution providers, and consultants. The interview questions involved asking for descriptions of the organizational members’ own experiences with the Yammer platform and their online interactions with other organizational members. Each of the interviews lasted between 40 to 50 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to prepare the data for coding and analysis. Table 1 provides an overview of the data collection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Data collected</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yammer log data</td>
<td>June 2012 to April 2014</td>
<td>1,997 Yammer posts and their comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field observations</td>
<td>February 2014 to April 2014</td>
<td>163 hours on-site observation and ongoing observation online on the Yammer platform (over 3 months),</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>March 2014 to June 2014</td>
<td>18 interviews with employees lasting between 40-50 minutes (CEO, HR manager, two sales people, five solution providers, three senior consultants, five consultants and one marketing assistant)</td>
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The analysis focused on the interplay between ESM and the social fabric as well as the interactions that underlie the collaborative initiatives on the platform. Our approach was qualitative in nature and involved making sense of the data we collected (Cresswell 2003). The data analysis followed a three-step process. First, we organized and indexed the various data sources into log data, field observations and interviews to obtain a general sense of the material. Second, we used the software tool MAXQDA to divide the material into text segments and added to each a descriptive notation to record abbreviated meaning and contextual information such as background, what the participants were doing, and the like (Rossman and Rallis 1998). Third, we developed a coding scheme that built on both the data and the related theoretical considerations. We applied the controversy approach (Venturini 2010) to look for instances where disagreements concerning the Yammer platform occurred between two or more organizational members. When a disagreement was identified, we worked with the controversy analysis in a five-fold process following each of the five observational lenses outlined in the theoretical foundations. This enabled us to create a structured approach to guide the coding of the data as illustrated in Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Controversy analysis lens</th>
<th>Questions guiding the coding</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lens 1: The arena of the controversy</td>
<td>What are the core statements and activities of the controversy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lens 2: Web of relations</td>
<td>Who are the actors? Who does something in the controversy?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lens 3: Process and flow</td>
<td>What work is going on in the controversy network?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lens 4: Reaching stability</td>
<td>What are the compromises made in the controversy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lens 5: Establishing the social order</td>
<td>What is the outcome of the controversy?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using this approach, we revealed four main controversies that emerged from the use of the Yammer platform in the case organization. We created a representational account of each controversy that in turn
was used to spin the threads of interaction that characterize the social fabric on the Yammer platform, thereby addressing the first research question.

To address the second research question, we analyzed the log data of two collaborative efforts on the Yammer platform, where a group of employees worked together to achieve a common goal. The collaborative initiatives were selected carefully to represent different collaborative activities carried out on Yammer. We investigated how the threads of the social fabric were woven in these collaborations. In particular, we focused on three elements, 1) the purpose of the collaborative initiative, 2) how each of the threads of the social fabric where represented and woven together in the collaboration, and 3) what outcome the collaborative initiative had.

In the next section, we present the findings from the analysis of the two research questions. We first address what characterizes the threads of the social fabric for interactions between organizational members who use enterprise social media and second, we look into what role the social fabric plays in collaboration on the platform.

**Part 1: Spinning the Threads of the Social Fabric**

This part addresses the first research question, what characterizes the social fabric of interactions between organizational members who use enterprise social media? Our definition of social fabric states that it is comprised of a set of threads of relationships. To reveal these threads, the analysis presents four controversies that emerged from the use of Yammer in the case organization. We examine the controversies through the five lenses of the controversy analysis, 1) mapping the controversy arena, 2) outlining the web of relations, 3) looking at process and flow of the network, 4) establishing stability through compromise, and 5) creating a social order (Latour 2005; Verturini 2010).

**Public – Private Context: Yammer as Classified Ads**

This controversy is about what should be the proper context of the Yammer use. It comprises a set of interactions taking place on the Yammer platform that deal with the sale of items within the company. The controversy takes place on the Yammer platform’s AllCompany news feed that is being utilized as a form of classified ads, which by some employees is deemed appropriate and by others not.

The first lens of the controversy analysis, mapping the arena of the controversy, highlights some core statements that frame the disagreement. The initial post was made by the CEO on the Yammer AllCompany news feed stating, “I need an iPad2 – who has one for sale?” (Yammer post, March 10 2014). Shortly after, a comment was made to this post by one of the senior consultants who wrote, “Now that the CEO has introduced the topic, would anyone happen to have a mac computer (mini, MacBook or the like) that they want to sell? It doesn’t have to be the newest but it shouldn’t be something prehistoric either. I would like a machine for app development and MacOS in a virtual box is not optimal.” (Yammer post, March 10 2014). The next day, another post appeared, this time from another senior consultant, who also posted to the AllCompany news feed, “Since this is now turning into classified ads, anyone who has a Surface they want to get rid of?” (Yammer post, March 11 2014). This comment received a lot of attention and led to the emergence of a number of bids and offerings of additional products by other organizational members. At one point, a resentful comment from a solution provider indicated that this conversation might not be appropriate for the public AllCompany news feed and he suggested that, “Maybe we should establish a flea market group for buying and selling?” (Yammer post, March 11 2014). Subsequently, the flea market group was established and the sales postings in AllCompany stopped. An interview with yet another senior consultant a few days later supported the sentiment of disagreement regarding whether the product conversation was appropriate in the Yammer context, “Well, I guess some of the noise (on the platform) comes when people get sidetracked. Like with the iPad case that the CEO started and which then turned into a whole set of comments that aren’t really relevant to everyone.” (Interview, senior consultant C, March 14 2014).

The second lens of the controversy analysis shows how the web of relations was made up of individual organizational members who served as actors posting to the AllCompany news feed. The actors included the CEO, a solution provider, and three senior consultants. In addition, the entire organization got involved because the postings of items for sale on Yammer were addressed to AllCompany. The Yammer
platform also served as an actor by preserving the posts as well as by amplifying them across the AllCompany news feed. The third lens of the controversy analysis focuses on process and flow. It reveals how the different actors were relating to one another in the network of the controversy. The main activity of the actors was initiating new posts and responding to posts already present on the Yammer platform. The preservation and amplification of the answers by the Yammer platform generated a flow of interactions in which multiple actors were able to respond to posts, thereby driving the conversation forward. The fourth lens of the controversy analysis is about reaching stability. It revealed that a compromise was established through the suggestion of creating a group to facilitate the selling and buying by individuals. Thereby, the conversation thread in the AllCompany news feed, that was disturbing for some organizational members, was moved to a special interest group. This resolved the controversy and a new social order was established.

The public-private context controversy demonstrates the emergence of a thread that becomes part of the social fabric of the organization. The thread is spun from the controversy that dealt with the issue of what should be the proper context of the Yammer use. The interactions that formed the controversy created a new social order that recognized the importance of public space as well as the necessity to form special interest groups for some interactions.

**Social – Professional Content: A World of Codes and Jokes**

This controversy is also about the appropriateness of certain content that is shared on the Yammer platform. However, in this case it refers to the tension between socially-oriented content such as jokes and pictures from social events and professionally-oriented content such as company documents and tips and tricks.

The first lens maps the arena of the controversy. It identifies core statements about how jokes and similar socially-oriented content on Yammer became a disturbing factor for some organizational members. In an interview, one of the senior consultants noted that, “All that social stuff, the jokes and the like, I could be without. I focus on the coding and the topics that are interesting to me... I have actually thought of unfollowing a lot of the people whom I am currently following, just because I don’t want to read what they post.” (Interview, senior consultant B, March 12 2014). The senior consultant further expressed how the professional content, providing insight into new code or technical advances posted on the Yammer platform, generated value for him. These reflections had led the senior consultant to consider ‘unfollowing’ some of his colleagues who were not contributing with this type of information but rather posting abundant socially-oriented content. However, an interview with one of the sales personnel revealed a different opinion on what was valuable content, “When they write all of those numbers then I just get confused. I don’t read all of that. I am more interested in what is going on and if there are any activities that I should be updated on...” (Interview, sales person, March 12 2014). Later on, during lunch, one person suggested that perhaps all “jokes and fun stuff” should be posted in a dedicated group instead of in the AllCompany news feed. His suggestion was turned down by the people around the table, who believed that this would “take away what is good about the Yammer platform.” (Field notes, March 19 2014).

The second lens of the controversy analysis reveals the web of relations formed by the organizational members and the Yammer platform. The actors included a senior consultant, a person from sales, the HR manager, the marketing assistant, as well as a number of solution providers and consultants. Yammer was also an actor that made available indiscriminately both professional and social content.

The third lens focuses on process and flow. This lens is particularly interesting in this case because the interview statements and the actual behavior of some of the individual actors were not aligned. For example, the senior consultant, who highlighted the importance of professional content over social content, also appeared to be contributing a lot of the social content on the site. The senior consultant was adding to both the professional and social content even though he objected to the social content on the Yammer platform.

The fourth lens of the controversy analysis offers insights into the compromise that settles the disagreement. The compromise was reached through the organizational members’ acceptance of both professionally-oriented and socially-oriented content on the platform. The continuous posting of both types of content on the Yammer platform demonstrated the de-facto approval of the socially-oriented
content in spite of the vocal objections. This resolved the controversy and a new social order was established.

The social-professional content controversy demonstrates the emergence of another thread that becomes part of the social fabric of the organization. The thread is spun from the controversy that deals with what should be a proper content on the Yammer platform. The interactions that formed the controversy created a new social order that recognized the inevitable entanglement of social and professional contents and that accepted socially-oriented content as equally important to professionally-oriented content.

**Praise – Reprimand Giving Ratio: Big Bladder Little Hose**

This controversy deals with the extent of praises and reprimands of organizational members expressed by their colleagues on the Yammer platform. Whereas the use of the praising option available on Yammer was generally appreciated, the extent of using the platform to reprimand colleagues within the company was controversial.

The first lens of the controversy analysis maps a series of praises and reprimands on the Yammer platform. One of the core functionalities of the Yammer platform is the option to praise colleagues. For example, one of the consultants was praised by a colleague for having completed an online course, “(Praise (Yammer label)). ‘Consultant A’ has just completed CRM 2013 – take a moment to congratulate him.” (Yammer post, January 12 2014). One of the senior consultants also said in an interview that, “I have praised someone and this was really nice – it is a good way to show what a colleague has done and then to have people recognize her achievement.” (Interview, senior consultant A, March 1 2014).

In contrast to praising, a post from the HR manager to AllCompany illustrated the nature of reprimanding behavior: “A reminder to all – especially now with the Christmas lunch coming up. REMEMBER: Big bladder little hose – please step one step closer to the toilet. Not that nice having to wipe up a big lake in the bathroom ;-)” (Yammer post, November 30 2012). This message, which was distributed on the Yammer platform to AllCompany, reprimanded a certain behavior and reminded everyone to keep the place clean. The field observations at the company revealed another incident of reprimanding behavior in which the HR manager was telling people to “please put back the butter in the fridge and put the lid on the Nutella after using it for their breakfast.” The HR manager explained that, “it was nice to be able to vent a little on Yammer” (Field notes, March 5 2014).

The second lens reveals the web of relations and included the HR-manager, various organizational members and consultants. Yammer was also an actor that enabled the praising option and the space for reprimands in the AllCompany news feed. Posting praises and reprimands to the Yammer AllCompany news feed further involved the entire organization as the receivers of the information.

The third lens, that focuses on process and flow, revealed that the Yammer platform encouraged praising behavior through its embedded praising function. However, reprimanding did not have an embedded function and was only expressed through posts in the general content. Some of the employees considered reprimands on Yammer to be inappropriate while those reprimanding others on Yammer found it appropriate. In this controversy, the fourth lens of the analysis revealed that a compromise was reached in the form of a certain ratio of praise and reprimand giving on the Yammer platform. While the praising happened frequently, the reprimands were displayed less often, and when they were, it was in a mellow tone, for example, “...now it is time for another tightening up of things here.....” (Yammer post, March 28 2014).

The praise-reprimands giving ratio controversy spun another thread that was weaved into the social fabric of the case company. The interactions that formed the controversy created a new social order that endorses and expects positive deviance when relating publically to others' behavior. That is, whereas praises were appreciated and even encouraged by the system functionality, reprimands were merely tolerated.

**News – Noise Perception: To Ignore or Engage, That is the Question**

This controversy is about turning Yammer into the main internal communication channel of the company although some employees perceive Yammer as a disturbance and prefer not using it in spite of the apparent expectation that they engage with it daily as part of their work.
The first lens maps the arena of the controversy. It identifies instances of failure to disseminate information and the consequent peril that follows. For example, one of the consultants came to the office in February to pick up his Christmas present. The consultant was obviously embarrassed that it had taken him so long and the HR manager reminded him to start paying more attention to the Yammer postings. After he left, the HR manager explained that, “the announcement about the Christmas presents was made in December on the Yammer platform and then again in a reminder in January. I refuse to keep reminding people” (Field notes, February 19 2014). She further added that the consultant who had just picked up his present was one of those organizational members who were very seldom at the office, which made it even more important for him to engage on Yammer. When she was asked why the consultant was not active on Yammer, she mentioned that, “he probably doesn’t have time in his busy workday to check Yammer. This might be the issue ... not even the promise of gifts can get him on Yammer [laughter]” (Field notes, February 19 2014). This observation was further supported by statements made by other organizational members about what was perceived as “noise” and what was perceived as “news” on the Yammer platform. Their perceptions seemed to be very subjective; as one of the sales people mentioned, “I think of it as my company newspaper and read it when I am on the train or have time to check-in” (Interview, sales person, March 12 2014). Mapping the arena of this controversy shows that the HR manager and the sales person viewed the information on Yammer as news, whereas the consultant considered it as noise in a busy workday. Contradictory perceptions were also present in the public–private context controversy in which some organizational members requested certain types of information to be moved into special interest groups. Similarly, we see commonalities with the disagreement about the distribution of social and professional content on Yammer.

The second lens explores the web of relations and shows that the actors involved in the controversy were the individual members of the organization who either perceived the interactions on the Yammer platform as noise or as news. In this specific example, the actors included the HR manager, a consultant, and a sales person. Much of the shared information was broadcast from a managerial level to the AllCompany news feed, involving the entire company as recipients. The AllCompany news feed encouraged the sharing of news and information that became noise or news depending on the individual members’ perceptions.

The third lens, which focuses on process and flow between the actors, reveals that the actions that followed had to do with one's choice either to ignore or to engage with the continuous stream of information that was communicated from multiple sources via Yammer. In cases when the messages shared on the platform were perceived as noise or irrelevant from the point of view of the individual organizational member, he or she tended to simply ignore the posts. In other cases, the individual organizational member would refer to the Yammer news feed as the company newspaper and attributed high importance to the interactions and information being shared. As mentioned by the sales person, the news items did not always result in new posts or comments, but simply connoted the process of browsing posts as a form of newspaper.

As part of the fourth lens of the controversy analysis, we see that stability was reached at an individual level. It was left to the individual organizational member to choose how and if he or she engaged on the Yammer platform. However, the management decision to post all relevant company information on the platform positioned it as the main communication channel of daily information concerning the company. The fifth lens of the controversy analysis shows that the new social order accepted that not all members engaged with the platform, yet the platform remained a necessary part of staying updated on activities within the company.

This news-noise perception controversy reveals yet another thread of the social fabric that pertains to the treatment of certain information on the platform as noise or as news. While acknowledging that news-noise perceptions of information were subjective and contextual, the management positioned Yammer as a mandatory platform in the company.

All in all, the controversy analysis uncovers four threads: ‘public-private context’, ‘social-professional content’, ‘praise-reprimands giving ratio’ and ‘noise-news perception’ that characterize the social fabric of interactions between organizational members who use ESM. The threads emerged from the interactions between actors, the compromises made, and the outcomes attained, as summarized in table 3 below.
Table 3. Summary of the Controversies and the Social Fabric Threads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Yammer as classified ads</th>
<th>Codes and jokes</th>
<th>Big bladder little hose</th>
<th>To ignore or engage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arena of the controversy</td>
<td>Disagreeing on Yammer purpose and context</td>
<td>Disagreeing on Yammer platform content</td>
<td>Disagreeing on mandatory Yammer engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web of relations (actors)</td>
<td>Individuals, AllCompany, Yammer platform</td>
<td>Individuals, AllCompany, Yammer platform</td>
<td>Individuals, AllCompany, Yammer platform</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>Actors are initiating and responding as well as amplifying</td>
<td>Actors are judging and evaluating as well as distributing and integrating</td>
<td>Actors are praising and reprimanding through labeling of actions and creation of context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching stability (compromise)</td>
<td>Moving from public domain to a private group</td>
<td>Accepting a mix of social and professional content</td>
<td>Expecting praises while tolerating some reprimands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social order (outcome)</td>
<td>Formation of special interest groups</td>
<td>Entanglement of social and professional contents</td>
<td>Positive deviance is normative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealed threads of social fabric</td>
<td>Public–Private context</td>
<td>Social–Professional content</td>
<td>Praise–Reprimands giving ratio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part 2: Weaving Collaboration

This part of the analysis addresses the second research question, *what is the role of the social fabric in collaborative efforts on enterprise social media?* We examine how the threads of the social fabric, described in the first part of the analysis, weave collaboration on Yammer (the threads are highlighted in the final row of table 3). We identified two collaborative initiatives in the case company in which a substantial number of organizational members worked together to accomplish a certain task. The first instance describes collaboration on a new blogging initiative on Yammer, and the second describes daily Scrum meetings on the platform. Our definition of social fabric puts the threads of relationships between individuals as well as the relationships between individuals and the group at large at center stage. We thus rely on the four revealed threads to analyze the role of the social fabric in weaving the relationships that form the basis of collaboration. The analysis of the two collaborative initiatives builds on empirical data consisting of posts and comments. The three-step structured analysis highlights (1) the purpose of the collaborative initiative, (2) the threads of the social fabric that are represented and woven together to form the collaboration, and (3) the outcome of the collaborative initiative.

**Collaborating on a New Initiative**

Establishing a new blog for the company website required cross-company collaboration. The initiative was managed mainly on the Yammer platform and involved organizational members from all levels in the company. The original purpose of the collaboration was to generate content for the new blog as well as motivate organizational members to engage on a continuous basis.
The public-private context thread of the social fabric becomes visible in this collaboration through the role it plays in the beginning of the initiative. The initial post, which announced the blog launch and encouraged organizational members to join the project, was made in the public AllCompany news feed. After a while, the interactions were moved into a special interest group that allowed organizational members to share information and help each other with proofreading and inspiration for writing their own blog posts:

‘CEO’ to ‘AllCompany’

We will soon start a blog on our website. We are looking for people who want to contribute with blog posts within our different business areas. Who wants to sign up? (Yammer post, November 29 2013)

This post received a high number of responses from organizational members who were interested in contributing. It also generated a question from a senior consultant to the CEO regarding the target group of the blog. The question was displayed publicly on the AllCompany news feed, which allowed the marketing assistant, who was involved in the setup of the blog, to respond:

‘Senior consultant A’ to ‘CEO’

Who is the target group of the blog? (Yammer post, December 1 2013)

‘Marketing assistant’ to ‘Senior consultant A’

There are multiple target groups, both clients whose primary interest is in how our solutions create value for them, but also a more technical target group who is interested in new technologies and design. (Yammer post, December 2 2013)

The response from the marketing assistant generated a lot of activity from other organizational members who stated that they would like to contribute. Consequently, the public availability of this information on the Yammer platform generated a broad interest among the organizational members for participating in the blogging initiative.

The social-professional content thread is also observed in the blogging initiative by encouraging more professionally-oriented content. This can be attributed to the nature of the blog as a professional outlet for promoting the work of the company online. The organizational members discussed the specific topics for the blog posts and requested comments and proof-reading before publishing content on the blog. In addition, we observed that also socially-oriented content formed the interactions on Yammer. This was visible in the tone of the interactions in which organizational members’ actions were stimulated by the use of smileys and encouraging comments. For example, the marketing assistant tried to motivate colleagues on the platform:

‘Marketing assistant’ to ‘Blogging group’

We have two posts left in the blog pile and I am posting one of them today so it is about time that we get some new posts. Go go go! :) (Yammer post, May 7 2014)

This post received a number of affirmative responses ranging from “likes” to comments from members who indicated that they would like to start producing their blog posts. Furthermore, this post also links to the praise-reprimand giving ratio of the collaboration initiative. For example, a chart displayed those members who contributed the most to the blog, thereby indirectly praising their efforts:

‘Marketing assistant’ to ‘Blogging group’

Do we soon have others who are contributing with more blog posts? :) Picture post: graph showing three main contributors and many non-contributors. (Yammer post, March 26 2014)

This post encouraged some of the organizational members to respond that they were in the process of writing something and would soon contribute. Following a period of little activity in the group, the CEO made a comment that included both praise and reprimand:
‘CEO’ to ‘AllCompany’, ‘Blogging group’, ‘Senior consultant A’, ‘Marketing assistant’

Senior consultant A has again been productive and I have submitted my third blog post for review with the marketing assistant. Isn’t it about time that a couple of those who haven’t yet contributed to our blog get started? (Yammer post, April 7 2014)

The CEO first praised the senior consultant who had contributed and then used this praise as a way to call those who had not yet contributed to action. This generated some activity among the other members of the group, who commented that they would try to produce something as soon as possible. What is interesting here is also that this post reached the public AllCompany news feed and thus was conveying information beyond the blogging group. The praises and reprimands were amplified on the public AllCompany news feed to the whole company to indicate who was contributing and who was not. The threads of public-private context and the praise-reprimand giving ratio together weaved the basis for activity within the group. A stronger reprimand was given to the group when the contribution of new posts seemed to be at a halt:

‘CEO’ to ‘Blogging group’

We had a clear agreement that everyone in the group should contribute to the blog. That is unfortunately not the case. We have made a decision to not include any more people in the blogging group in order to regain dynamics and ensure that we can move forward. If you do not plan to deliver a post for the blog soon then you should let us know so you can be replaced by another employee. All reply! (Yammer post, May 7 2014)

This post generated a lot of responses from organizational members who had not previously engaged with the group:

‘Solution provider A’ to ‘CEO’

I am in and will make a blog post for next week. (Yammer post, May 7 2014)

‘Solution provider B’ to ‘CEO’

I am still in and will soon be submitting another post. (Yammer post, May 7 2014)

‘Consultant A’ to ‘CEO’

I am in – I have three half-finished posts that I will turn into at least two full posts. (Yammer post, May 7 2014)

This made the CEO respond to the group with great enthusiasm:

‘CEO’ to ‘Blogging group’

Really great! It sounds like we have a lot of posts coming up. Then I’d better get started with my fourth one :-) (Yammer post, May 7 2014)

Reflecting on this strong reprimand and the activity it created also relates to the thread of social-professional content where the first post from the CEO to the group underlined the professional side of the blogging initiative, while the last post from the CEO reintroduced the softer tone of smileys and encouragement.

The activity that was initiated in the blogging initiative and the responses from the organizational members can also be tied to the thread of news-noise perception, which is linked to the collaborative initiative’s goal of generating interesting posts for the new company blog. The blogging initiative focused on providing news both in terms of the newest technologies and upcoming initiatives in the company. The scope of collaboration was in this sense involving all organizational members at the company. This resulted in a perception of the information as news rather than noise for those members who were not participating but mainly listened in, since the information directly concerned the company and was relevant for all organizational members. An example of the broad interest in the blogging activities was visible in the Yammer blogging group through the constant sharing of ideas and inspiration for what to blog about:
‘Senior consultant A’ to ‘Blogging group’

I am working on a post about the APIs in Office 365. Do any of you have any inputs to which parts of Office 365 people use the most/the least so I can bring forward some of the APIs in that area…? (Yammer post, April 24 2014)

This post was met with a number of responses in which other organizational members shared their own experiences and gave supporting comments highlighting how this was a great topic to address. Subsequently, the news-noise perception of this post reflected a high news perception among the members of the group.

By analyzing the role of the social fabric in this collaborative effort, we are able to single out how the different threads play a role in the interactions of the blogging initiative. The public-private context thread demonstrates a balance between the private and public context through the occasional cross-postings of information on the special interest group and the public AllCompany news feed. This public-private context thread weaves together with the praise-reprimand giving ratio in which both praises and reprimands are given so that the whole company can see them. The social-professional content thread reveals that the blogging initiative is dominated by professional content but also includes some social content. In relation to the social-professional content thread, the news-noise perception appears to gravitate towards a perception of news. The public-private context thread, providing the private context of the group, further enhances this news perception since the organizational members who are involved with the group need to stay updated on its activities.

The outcome of the collaboration shows that the different social fabric threads weave the blogging initiative into a stage of stability in which continuous engagement of the organizational members is reached. The threads of the social fabric are woven together by the different actors including the organizational members, the AllCompany news feed, and the Yammer platform, enabling the collaborative initiative to flourish. The blogging initiative is still taking place in the case company and the ongoing interaction in the Yammer group has resulted in continuous production of posts for the blog.

To further address the weaving of the social fabric in relation to collaboration on the Yammer platform, we consider another example concerning collaborating on a day-to-day activity.

**Collaborating on a Day-to-Day Activity**

Scrum meetings serve as a common process to facilitate team collaboration at the case company. Carried out routinely on a daily or weekly basis, the Scrum meetings function as a forum where teams report the status of their respective projects in progress as well as plan upcoming events or activities. The following describes the case of ‘Team Truly Awesome’ that attempted to move its face-to-face Scrum meetings to the Yammer platform in order to cater for the substantial number of team members that are geographically dispersed. The senior consultant in charge of the group decided to carry out the Scrum meeting by addressing all seven members of the team in a post available on the widely visible AllCompany news feed:


Since we are all in different locations today, I thought we could try (as an experiment) to run the daily Scrum on Yammer. So everyone, respond to this post with what you did yesterday, what you are doing today, and which impediments you have, and then we will see how it goes. (Yammer post, October 10 2013)

The public-private context thread is evident in this case. The entire communication including low-level details pertaining to the work of Team Truly Awesome was visible to everyone in the organization because it was posted on the AllCompany news feed. This presented an interesting dynamic along the continuum of the private-public context thread because the matters discussed in the Scrum meeting were intended for the organizational members who were part of the team, and not for everyone in the company. Posting the invitation to the meeting on the AllCompany news feed resulted in unintended public communication of privileged information about the project status.

An examination of the social-professional content thread indicates that the content is professional in nature because it included only updates on technical challenges and progress reports with regard to
certain systems and codes. The written format of the Yammer platform allowed for detailed descriptions of the activities carried out:

‘Consultant C’, cc. ‘Consultant D’ and ‘Senior consultant B’

Yesterday I worked on fixing the search function and verifying its functionalities. The user properties were missing from the phone book because the crawler account did not have access to the user profile service application. Now the search/phone book is working. There are a couple of minor bugs in the system, which I will ask the provider to fix. Today, I will work on verifying the user profile properties on Dev and PROD and prepare the deployment package to be ready for Monday.

A majority of the team members valued the thorough description because it provided them with valuable details. However, other members noted that they were not comfortable with writing in lieu of face-to-face discussion. One of the team members wrote:

‘Consultant D’ to ‘Team Truly Awesome’

I don’t really know what to write... But maybe I will call ‘Senior Consultant B’ later. (Yammer post, October 10, 2013)

An interesting dynamic occurred when one of the solution providers turned the posting of professional content into a more social and private-oriented post:

‘Solution provider C’, cc ‘Solution provider D’ and ‘Senior consultant B’

Yesterday, I was at a meeting with >client< about SOP project estimation and schedule. Did error search on why the team site is not deployed with senior consultant B. Crashed my laptop and spent the whole night fixing it. Today, I have a coaching session with Solution provider D and I need to consult the doctor regarding pains in my shoulder. (Yammer post, October 10 2013)

This seemed to create a halt in the conversation and did not yield any response.

Praises were demonstrated many times in the comment stream of the Scrum meeting. For example, here is a praise of one of the colleagues for solving a complex task:

‘Senior consultant B’ in reply to ‘Consultant C’

The fact that consultant C has gotten the 2013 search function at ‘client X’ to work in 2010 mode is a huge accomplishment for us! I doubt that anyone else has ever succeeded in doing that. (Yammer post, October 10 2013)

At a glance, the praise appeared as a positive reinforcement. The praise was also in line with the praise-reprimands giving ratio thread that supports positive deviance. However, this praise and all others were bluntly ignored although they were communicated and amplified by the Yammer platform through the AllCompany news feed. The loud silence of the organizational members with respect to the praising behavior may reflect their disapproval. The dismissal of the praises and the absence of reprimanding behavior put the interactions on the Yammer platform at a halt and inhibited further collaboration.

The news-noise perception thread also came to bear. The proceedings of the Scrum meeting were available to everyone who could access the AllCompany news feed. However, it was a one-off event that has not been adopted as a practice. The Scrum posts were relevant only to one particular team and the rest of the organizational members perceived it as noise. Further, some of the Scrum team members were reluctant to use Yammer because it felt different from what is normal and accepted, as one of them said: “I don’t really know why we use it (Yammer) for those things that we do elsewhere normally, but maybe it will come with time” (Interview, Senior consultant C, 12 March 2014).

The outcome of the Scrum collaboration on Yammer demonstrates how the social fabric can inhibit continuous collaboration on the platform. The posts of the Scrum meeting appeared to be privileged information that was left for the public display. Thus, it was against the grain of the private-public context thread. While using Yammer worked for some of the Scrum team members, the public display appeared to be intimidating for others and violating the social-professional content thread. The unacceptable interplay between the public-private context and the socially-oriented content seemed to inhibit further
communication on the platform. Even praises that appeared in the group did not receive any acknowledgment because the entire proceedings of the Scrum team were perceived by everyone else as noise and not news. The social fabric threads played a critical role in inhibiting the formation of relationships between the participants in the Scrum team. Subsequently, the Yammer platform was abandoned and the Scrum team used other communication media such as conference calls and emails.

The blogging project and the Scrum meeting cases show that the social fabric may have a different interaction effect on attempts to use ESM as collaborative platforms. The two initiatives demonstrate how collaboration on the Yammer platform can be enabled when it supports the prevailing social fabric, and how collaboration can be inhibited when it is framed against the grain. Furthermore, the analysis shows that ESM technology presents a complex environment in which collaborative efforts must be tackled carefully, on a case-by-case basis, and in consideration of the interactive effect of the social fabric.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what characterizes the social fabric of interactions between organizational members who use ESM as well as the role of the social fabric in collaborative efforts on ESM. Overall, the findings show that identifying the emerging threads of the social fabric can help tracing the progress of different collaborative initiatives on ESM platforms and anticipating their success. In particular, the study provides three main contributions.

First, we highlighted the role that social fabric plays in enabling and forming collaboration on ESM. The literature already suggests that collaboration relies on the relationships and interactions between individuals. Our study goes further and points to the social fabric as a primary foundation and deep structure of collaboration. In particular, we define social fabric as a fuzzy construct that refers to the prevailing beliefs and norms that regulate the relationships among people in a collective. Social fabric comprises the threads of relationships between individuals as well as the relationships between individuals and a respective group at large. Identifying the threads of the social fabric seems to be the key to tracking the progress and enabling the success of collaborative initiatives. In our case organization, each of the revealed threads: ‘public-private context’, ‘professional-social content’, ‘praises-reprimands giving ratio’ and ‘news-noise perception’ played a significant role in the success or lack thereof of the collaborative on the Yammer platform.

Second, we argued that in order to understand the prospects of ESM platforms and the role that they can play in organizations, we must move beyond studying the functionalities and outcome of using ESM technologies, towards understanding the social premise of these media. We showed that ESM platforms become part of the social fabric of organizations. This builds on previous studies that describe the dynamics and fluidity of online communities and social media and indicate how these dynamics can influence the relations between individuals (Faraj et al. 2011; Ma and Agerwal 2007). We also showed that an investigation of new technologies such as ESM should include a consideration of the entanglement of their respective social and technical components.

Third, we showed that the controversy approach (Venturini and Latour 2010) is a powerful tool for investigating the social fabric and the role it plays in collaboration. The use of controversies to describe the social fabric provided a valuable analytical approach to investigating the underlying mechanisms that drive the dynamics of the ESM platform interactions. Relying on the five observational lenses of the controversy analysis, we were able to first identify the threads of the social fabric, and subsequently we relied on these threads as the foundation to analyze the role of the social fabric in weaving the relationships that form the basis of collaboration. Through our study, we realized that the identification and description of the controversies gave a new perspective on what was actually going on in the organizational use of ESM. The approach provided a starting point for revealing what characterizes the social interactions in a new way, through looking at the conflicts and disagreements that emerged around them.

The three contributions provide insights into the role of social fabric and the application of ESM in organizations. Based on these insights we can make the following recommendations for practice.

Creating a supportive working environment that stimulates the development of skills and organizational arrangements in which collaborative activities can flourish is still a key challenge (Thomas and Bostrom
Investing in IT-enabled collaborative tools for this purpose is necessary but insufficient; much more is needed to achieve joint coordinated efforts of individuals or groups across certain boundaries. Our analysis reveals that the threads of the social fabric in situ can provide rich insights into how ESM actually work. The findings demonstrate that if managers want to support collaboration on ESM, they first need to understand the foundations of the social fabric in their organization. We encourage managers to look for the four identified threads as a starting point, and also to search for other threads that characterize the social fabric of their specific organization. One way to reveal the social fabric of a particular organization would be to look closely at the controversies that emerge among organizational members, which highlight the prevailing beliefs and norms that regulate the relationships among people in the collective.

Regarding the management of ESM, our field observations give an account of an ongoing discussion within the case organization on whether to create certain rules and regulations for what can be posted and what is appropriate behavior on the Yammer platform. The study shows that bottom-up self-regulation is very effective and that top-down regulation is likely to be counterproductive unless it is fine-tuned continuously in consideration of the social fabric. For example, finding the proper balance between public and private content or between professional and social content is best left to the tacit hand of the social process among the organizational members. The power of ESM platforms is based on how well they fit with the organization’s social fabric, which cannot be regulated and should be left to develop naturally.

The study has a number of limitations that pave the way for further research. The dynamics of the social fabric has multiple ramifications and potential confounding effects. Our study focused solely on the role of the social fabric in support of collaboration, but other facets of organizational life should be explored. For example, one may explore the role of the social fabric in knowledge generation and sharing, coordination, and performance of groups and individuals.

It is also likely that the four threads identified in the case company may not be exhaustive. The four threads uncovered in our analysis present the results from one organization during a limited period of time. We urge researchers and practitioners to identify additional threads through data collected from a larger and more heterogeneous set of organizations and collaborative initiatives.

Our study was conducted during the introduction phase of the ESM platform. However, further insights will be gained from follow-up studies that take a broader view of the social fabric off the ESM platform and a longitudinal approach that examines the social fabric in multiple periods.

The findings of this study pertain to one specific organization’s use of the Yammer platform. Future studies could include other types of organizations in terms of size, industry, and structure as well as other ESM tools. Broadening the scope may reveal new threads of the social fabric that influence collaborative initiatives in organizations.

**Concluding Remarks**

This study provides insights into the potential role of ESM in support of collaboration through the investigation of how social fabric is woven into an organizational setting. We provide three overall contributions, as follows: 1) introducing social fabric as a valuable theoretical frame for studying collaboration on ESM in organizations; 2) underlining the entanglement of the social and technical components when we want to understand ESM at work; and 3) using the five observational lenses of the controversy analysis to reveal the social fabric. Identifying the threads of the social fabric in the case company provided insights into how ESM become an integrative part-and-parcel of the social environment in organizations by enabling and inhibiting collaboration. We suggest that successful collaboration on ESM should be planned in consideration of the prevailing social fabric and that going against the grain is likely to be counterproductive.

**References**


