Emergence and Mutability of Social Media Work Practices in Organisational Context

Najmeh Hafezieh
University of Edinburgh, N.hafezieh@ed.ac.uk

John Amis
University of Edinburgh, john.amis@ed.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2017

http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2017/Strategy/Presentations/9

This material is brought to you by the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS) at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in ICIS 2017 Proceedings by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.
Emergence and Mutability of Social Media Work Practices in Organisational Context

Short Paper

Najmeh Hafezieh
University of Edinburgh Business School
Edinburgh, UK
Najmeh.hafezieh@ed.ac.uk

John Amis
University of Edinburgh Business School
Edinburgh, UK
John.Amis@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Social media technologies have offered new opportunities for organisations to relate to their external stakeholders such as customers. Notwithstanding the significant opportunities, the question of how organisations manage these technologies and their internal processes associated with them has been left unanswered. Adopting a practice lens, we have conducted a case study to examine how new work practices emerge and what the nature of these practices is. Furthermore, we have applied the concept of ‘technology-in-practice’ to understand the underlying dynamics of these emerging work practices and technology structures. In this research-in-progress paper, we have found that these work practices are mutable as the organisation’s actors continuously engage in improvisation and reflexive actions in response to changes in the technology or users’ behaviours. This improvising or reflexive acting of organisational actors makes the continuous changes in work practices inevitable, which render the social media management structure in continuous flux.

Keywords: Social media, Work practices, Technology use, Practice lens, Technology-in-practice

Introduction

Social media technologies exemplify ‘the most transformative impacts’ of information technologies (IT) on organisations, both within and beyond their boundary (Aral et al. 2013). This group of technologies has been called a ‘revolutionary platform for marketers’ by the analyst firm, Gartner Inc., as businesses are looking for different ways of using digital and social technologies to create new growth opportunities (Sarner and Wilson 2016). Existing research has provided insight for the positive outcomes that social media bring forth for businesses from both marketing and information systems perspectives. Such outcomes entail higher chances of customers’ product adoption, higher levels of customers’ purchase spending, and increasing customers loyalty (Thompson and Sinha 2008; Wu et al. 2017). Despite their benefits, the effect of social media on organisations’ processes that has been specified as an important research area (Kane, Alavi, et al. 2014), is widely unaddressed.

While before social media era, organisations were accustomed to communicating their messages to consumers through conventional channels of communications, “they have now become mere nodes in complex networks where messages are propagated, attenuated, and amplified by users themselves” (Aral et al. 2013, p. 7). Organisations need to respond to this shift by developing new strategies and learning how to organise and manage their social media (Benthaus et al. 2016; Risius and Beck 2015). In this regard, Aral et al. (2013) proposed a framework for studying social media, highlighting the ‘management and organisation’ of social media as the most underresearched area. In this paper, we aim to address the call by Aral et al. (2013) to investigate the firm level use of social media in terms of their ‘management and
organisation’ to understand how social media activities are governed, how the responsibility of social media is assigned and what changes in organisational structures and processes are needed according to their proposed framework for social media research.

From the theoretical perspective, we adopt a practice lens and more specifically the concept of ‘technology-in-practice’ (Orlikowski 2000) to investigate how technology structures—facilities, norms and interpretive schemes emerge with regard to social media technologies. With distinctive characteristics of these new forms of technologies (Kallinikos et al. 2013), understanding this is important as despite their insights, practice-informed studies of IT in organisations have mainly focused on the particular type of technology that is used within the boundary of the organisation (e.g. intranet) and its role in the existing work practices that the organisational actors are performing. Moreover, according to Markus and Silver (2008, p. 627), “[the] continual emergence of new technologies inevitably requires ongoing conceptual development”.

To address these questions, we have conducted an in-depth qualitative case study of a large multinational technology company. The result of this study is expected to contribute to the literature of technology and organisation by unpacking how organisations construct the expertise, the organising arrangements and the infrastructure, or in other words, how new work practices emerge in management of new forms of highly malleable social media technologies. In addition, this study empirically improves our understanding of the internal processes of organisations in social media management, more particularly, the ways organisations govern social media activities such as how they allocate social media responsibilities, how they create new processes and norm, and how they adapt to changes in the technologies.

Theoretical Background

Social Media Technologies and Organisations

With the advent of new forms of digital and social technologies, researchers have been attempting to provide insight into the role of these new technologies in revolutionising organisations’ functions and processes. With their unique features, functions and affordances, social media technologies are rapidly transforming organisations in relation to their internal and external stakeholders such as their employees and customers (Aral et al. 2013). In relation to their customers, organisations can harness the power of social media in exploiting the unprecedented volume of information shared on these platforms to predict demand (Bollen et al. 2011), exploit the power of crowds in peer to peer marketing (Aral and Walker 2011) or new product and service innovation (Dong and Wu 2015). Much of the prior literature on organisational use of social media has focused on the use of these technologies as marketing tools. For example, by exploring Facebook’s use of a retail firm, Goh et al. (2013) showed that engagement with customers on social media can lead to higher purchase spending by customers. Moreover, Rishika et al.’s (2013) study on firm level social media practices found that customers’ participation in companies’ social media activities resulted in higher frequency of customers’ visits and higher customer profitability.

In addition, more studies investigated the relationship between social media and firm valuation. In their study of technology firms, Luo et al. (2013) illustrate that social media can predict market returns. Comparing to traditional online behavioural metrics (Google searches and Web traffic), they also show that social media metrics have a stronger and faster predictive power for market returns. In their discussions of measuring brand equity, Moor and Lury (2011, p. 446) argue some new measures can be used in classifying customer relationship management (CRM) databases and web analytics data “to identify ‘opinion leading category promoters’”. In this regard, they refer to ‘listening platforms’ that are used in this search process to discover the tone and sentiment of customer conversations on social media “in order to enable companies to address the concerns of especially vociferous critics or to reward and harness the positive contributions of others” (2011, p. 446). Such developments enable organisations to measure other values and qualities related to customers and customer relationships such as ‘propensity to recommend’. This is also highlighted in Viale et al.’s (2015) study of how developments in social media analytics provides unprecedented approaches to measuring the impact of marketing activities and tracking customers.

Extant literature illustrates the potential positive outcomes of social media for firms and organisations from a customer relationship perspective. However, more recently it has been argued that this revolutionising nature of technology for organisations transcends the marketing function (Kane, Doug Palmer, et al. 2014; Quesenberry 2016). With more attention drawn to the organisation’s role, Risius and Beck (2015), by
Emergence and Mutability of Social Media Work Practices

investigating social media management strategies of firms, illustrated the positive influence of greater investment in social media management on customers’ word of mouth and loyalty. Thus, organisations need to actively manage their social media (Miller and Tucker 2013) and employ social media management tools (as part of their social media strategy) to enhance the word of mouth among social media communities and enhance their relationship with them (Benthaus et al. 2016). Notwithstanding the insightful efforts, the underlying dynamics of how organisations construct the expertise towards active social media management (interpretive schemes), the processes and rules that social media work is practiced based on (norms) and in which social media management technologies they invest for managing social media (facilities) has largely remained unknown. Therefore, we examine these in addressing to Aral et. al.’s (2013) call for empirical research in this important area.

**Practice Perspective in Understanding Technology in Organisations**

Research on the role of information technology (IT) in organisations is well-developed in addressing how different forms of IT change existing work practices at both micro and macro levels (Baptista 2009; Ellway and Walsham 2015; Schultze and Orlikowski 2004; Vaast and Walsham 2005). This strand of research has adopted a practice lens (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011), to avoid the social and material dualism, not only to consider materiality of the technology but also to emphasise the organisational actors’ agency in conducting their work practices. The initial utilisation of a practice lens in studies of technology and organisations dates back two decades when Orlikowski (1996), building on Giddens’ structuration theory, examined how new forms of ITs change work practices in organisations. Highlighting the inadequacy of existing approaches to study the continuous changes in the technologies and their use, Orlikowski (2000) proposed a practice-oriented perspective to study this phenomenon. In this regard, Orlikowski (2000, p. 408) proffered the notion of ‘technology-in-practice’ to “[focus] on emergent technology structures enacted in practice rather than embodied structures fixed in technologies”.

Orlikowski (2000) explains that users draw on in the process of ongoing technology use that shape ‘technology-in-practice’ structures: ‘facilities’, ‘norms’ and ‘interpretive schemes’. Facilities refer to technological resources such as hardware and software and data sources. While ‘norms’ refer to social and cultural conventions of the setting and the institutional context, ‘interpretive schemes’ are related to knowledge and expertise of the technology and its use that can be affected by prior experience, training and other communications. In this regard, “people’s use of technology becomes structured by these experiences, knowledge, meanings, habits, power relations, norms, and the technological artefacts at hand” (2000, p. 410). Based on practice perspective (Orlikowski 2010), the concept of technology-in-practice can be used to explain how the use of technology becomes structured through the knowledge, norms, experiences and the technological artefacts, that then guides the future use.

The focus of such studies has been on the implications of the technology for the existing established organisational work practices (Orlikowski 2000; Schultze and Orlikowski 2004) that can result in no change in work practices, an improvement in how current work practices are done, or transformation of current work practices. Other studies have also adopted a practice lens to study the micro foundations of work practices (Leonardi 2015). Such studies have drawn attention to the agency of individual actors and their reflexivity in IT-related changes of work practices (Ellway and Walsham 2015; Vaast and Walsham 2005). Reflexivity refers to the mental capacity of actors to regard themselves in relation to their social settings in which they perform and consider how they are framed in their perceptions, attitudes and actions. According to Gorli et al. (2015, p. 5), “[r]eflection conceived as practical reflexivity thus examines the habitual ways of seeing the world and the norms of thought and behaviour acquired from authoritative sources and taken for granted”. Thus, it enables assessment of “consolidated habits of perceiving, thinking, remembering, resolving problems and feeling”. Reflexivity can draw attention to micro foundations of practice with regard to individual actors’ recognition and understanding of how the new IT might influence the existing work practices (Ellway and Walsham 2015).

In addition, a close look at the insightful stream of research in this field reveals the nature of technology that has been the focal point of attention. Whether focusing on IT (Orlikowski 1996) or other technological artefacts (e.g. Barley’s (1986) study on CT scanners and Suchman’s (2007) research on Xerox photocopiers), research has focused on the interactions of individual users (e.g. employees) with a new type of technology within the boundary of the organisation and how situated enactments by individual users would impact the existing (and established) work practices. However, it is important to note the distinct nature of social
media technologies (e.g. wikis, blogs, social networking sites) that have been conceptualised as ‘digital artefacts’ (Ekbia 2009; Kallinikos et al. 2010). Digital artefacts lack stability and are constantly changing (Zittrain 2008) due to their editability, openness, transfigurability, distributedness and interactivity (Kallinikos et al. 2013). Therefore, they are of ambivalent ontology (Kallinikos et al. 2013).

‘Editability’ can occur either through changes in the composition of the digital artefacts (e.g. software code) or changes related to its contents, data or items (e.g. wiki pages). 'Interactivity' attributes to various ways of actuating the functions of the artefacts, which does not necessarily lead to immediate change in the digital artefact. Thus, interactivity can result in actualisation of different affordances depending on the users' intents and goals. 'Openness' of digital artefacts reflects their character to be accessed or adapted by other digital artefacts (e.g. using a content management system software application to publish content on the website). 'Distributedness' refers to the fact that digital artefacts are bundles of functions, features and information elements that are spread over the Internet and are not inscribed in a single source or institution, thus, digital artefacts are without boundaries. Therefore, distributedness enables myriads of compositions and arrangements of functions, features, and information items, “a condition that renders digital objects fluid and crucially transfigurable” (Kallinikos et al. 2013, p. 360).

In addition to their unique characteristics as digital artefacts, the networked structures of social media (Bechmann and Lomborg 2012) differentiate them from other forms of digital technologies that incur new challenges for organisation (Kane, Alavi, et al. 2014). Thus, we need further investigation to understand how ‘technology-in-practice’ structures emerge in relation to these new forms of technologies with high levels of malleability and transfigurability and what the nature of such structures is.

**Research Method**

This research-in-progress paper is part of a larger study that is investigating the underlying dynamics of organisations’ use of malleable social media technologies. Our research design involves an in-depth single case study approach (Walsham 1995, 2006). The rational for single case study is to investigate an unknown phenomenon in an in-depth manner through a revelatory case (Yin 2013). The selection of the revelatory case was based on the necessity of choosing an organisation that the social media is integrated in its overall strategy, has an active presence in social media, and extensively engages with consumers on the platforms. Initially we conducted pilot interviews with 10 individuals in organisations of different sizes and in different sectors. The individuals were all involved in social media in their particular roles such as digital media consultant, head of digital marketing, digital marketing manager and social media executive. Based on these interviews, we selected a large internet-based technology organisation that was an early adopter of social media technologies in 2007. These technologies are embedded in the operations of the organisation.

**Case Description**

TSE, a pseudonym, is a UK-based leading technology company that offers digital travel solutions such as online travel search services to both consumers and businesses. The company is a multinational organisation that has over 1000 employees in 10 countries including UK, US, Singapore, and China. TSE actively maintains its presence on major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Google Plus, Pinterest and several country specific platforms such as VKontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki (OK) in Russia and Weibo in China. An indication of this active presence is reflected in the number of likes or followers on the platforms, the frequency of sharing content and also quick response time to users which has led TSE to gain former ‘very responsive to messages’ and current ‘typically replies instantly’ badges on Facebook. This presence is widely managed across countries and regions, for instance, with more than 8.5 million users on TSE’s Facebook page, it is accessible in 55 countries. TSE has also been a success story on Facebook for its mobile application (app) downloads in using Facebook’s advertising platform.

---

1 To earn this badge, the page must have achieved two criteria over the past seven days: a response rate of 90% and a response time of 15 minutes (Facebook Help Centre).
Data Collection and Analysis

We have collected data from three sources: semi-structured interviews, netnography and documents. We followed Walsham’s (1995, 2006) suggestions in interpretive case studies to use different data sources to supplement interview data. First, 22 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 17 individuals in TSE. The participants have been selected and contacted based on the criteria of their role in social media management. We have interviewed eight social media managers, three content managers, three social advertising executives, one graphic designer, one influencer marketing manager, and one data analyst. We have also conducted five follow up interviews. Moreover, in order to make more sense of the interviews and the data more generally, we have also been conducting expert interviews. We have conducted 10 interviews with nine experts in order to gain more insight into the prevalent organisational social media practices. These independent individuals were consultants in social media, search, growth hacking, influencer marketing, and digital marketing, who often offer their services to major brands in various sectors, or they work in major social media management technology companies such as Sprinklr2. Thus, they had an in-depth understanding of developments in digital marketing, in general, and social media practices, in particular, in organisational context. The interviews, ranging from 33 to 92 minutes with an average length of 65 minutes, were all audio recorded and transcribed.

Second, upon embarking on collecting data through interviews, we have been actively carrying out a netnography (virtual observation) (Kozinets 2010) of TSE’s social media activities on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google plus, and Instagram (in different countries and languages). This allowed us to observe the cases of TSE’s activities on these platforms, for example, the type of content is being shared, how the functions of platforms are being used, how interactions with users occur. Netnography data provided more detail to the interview data as such online sources of data has been considered ‘very valuable’ (Walsham 2006). Third, we have collected documents about the company such as brand guidelines and social media use from company’s websites, blogs, and media websites. In addition, as researchers studying social media technologies in organisations, we have been immersed in various sources of information related to digital technologies in general and social media platforms in particular such as consultancy reports, corporate blogs and the business press.

Transcripts of all 32 interviews, virtual observation notes, blog posts and documents were stored as a dataset in NVivo. We coded the data with NVivo 11 Software Package initially through descriptive coding (Miles and Huberman 1994), which resulted in first order codes informed by our theoretical lens. Since, our aim was to understand how technology structures emerge in the context of social media, we considered ‘work practices’, “practices through which work is accomplished” (Leonardi 2015, p. 237), as the unit of analysis. Through this process, we were able to understand how the new work practices emerged in the organisation and specifically the expertise, infrastructure, and ways of working.

Enactment of Social Media Management in Practice

TSE’s initial use of social media was not based on a particular strategy and was not integrated into the core TSE’s practices. However, unlike the initial use, the current practice of social media management is integrated into the organisational structure. Our data reveals two sets of work practices regarding social media in TSE: paid and non-paid social media work practices. These work practices play a crucial role in the business of TSE. This major role of Facebook, for example, has been highlighted by the TSE’s director of growth in Facebook F8 2016. By referring to two types of Facebook advertising functionality, linked ads and mobile app install ads, she explains how the extensive use of Facebook helped them grow their mobile traffic by 60%. Due to widespread opportunities that these platforms are offering for TSE, we present how the new work practices regarding social media technologies have emerged within the organization and the nature of these new work practices.

---

3 Facebook’s annual developer conference
Emergence and Mutability of Social Media Work Practices

Emergence of New Work Practices

Through TSE’s paid and non-paid social media practices, we have observed the emergence of new work practices in the organisation that did not exist before: social media community management, social media data analytics, content management, social advertising, and influencer relationship management. Various individuals with specific knowledge and expertise are involved in the ongoing use of the technology that constitutes these practices. These organisational members are structured in specific teams and work based on the specific norms and organising arrangements. In addition, new technologies have been adopted and configured to support these work practices and the associated activities. Figure 1 shows this process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilities</th>
<th>Norms</th>
<th>Knowledge and Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social media management technologies</td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>Integrating social media to organisation’s strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analytics technologies</td>
<td>Experimenting</td>
<td>Understanding capabilities and constraints of social media platforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Technologies</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Manoeuvering multiple platforms and technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible organising</td>
<td>Knowing market and users’ use of social media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New Organisational Roles: Forming new knowledge and Expertise

Since 2011, by adopting social media platforms in different languages and country specific platforms, the new functions of ‘social’ and ‘content’ emerged in the organisational structure of TSE (along with marketing and PR). The function of ‘social’ encompasses social media executives and social media managers who are involved in a range of activities related to social media, while the function of ‘content’ is constituted by content managers who manage the production of content (in form of articles) for the news section of the company’s website and for publishing on social media platforms.

The social media management roles are structured at three levels: the global head of social media, the regional level senior social media managers covering Asia Pacific (APAC), Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA), and the Americas (North and South America), and the market level social media managers (UK, Italy, China, etc.). The Germany social media manager explained her responsibilities: “As a social media manager in [TSE], you are mainly responsible for the content that is going out on our social channels for each market. With the content meaning both imagery as well as readable content or as for visual, recently video, but you are also responsible for coordinating all the advertising with the paid social media team or squad. That is the main thing but you are also, of course, responsible for the analysis of everything that we do.”

In the regional and global levels, the roles become more strategic in terms of developing and implementing the regional and global strategy of social media, coordinating the social media managers, developing analytics reports and working with marketing and advertising roles towards revenue-driven goals. For example, the main responsibility of the global head of social media is to develop both the global strategy and advertising strategy of social media and coordinating a team of over 30 individuals across the globe. The EMEA social media manager noted: “My main responsibility is managing a team of about eight people who are full time social media managers for the key markets and the remaining four for the [other] 12
markets, we have agencies and freelancers that we manage as well. So, in each of those markets, typically in Europe we are on all the main channels, we use them very differently. For example, Twitter is not a major channel in Scandinavia and is not as widely used by consumers in the same way in France or Germany either, but in Spain and Italy, it is more heavily used. So, as an example we definitely tailor what we do in each channel to the market. The key thing is that every market has a very different strategy.

The enactment of work practices through ongoing activities is not limited to the mentioned organisational roles. Besides social media and content managers, there are other experts work in other areas of social media such as influencer marketing manager, social advertising or social media campaign executives, in-house design team, and business intelligence analysts and data scientists.

**New Working Mechanisms: Organising Arrangements and Norms**

In 2015, TSE went through a restructuring, shifting from a functional structure to a team-based structure of tribes and squads to facilitate the growth objective of the company. In this new structure, the functional roles have been brought together in teams called squads for each market in which the company is operating. The squads operate as part of four larger groups called tribes. Each country squad usually consists of a social media manager, a content manager, a marketing manager and a PR manager working together as a self-organising autonomous team to strategise and realise the vision of the company in that market. The experts’ views also indicated that social media have become more embedded into the structure of organisations: “Although some organisations are still unsure and they have several departments dealing with social media, there seems to be more structural thinking in more socially mature organisations to arrange human resources for social media” (Social Media and Digital marketing consultant).

The logic behind this restructuring was based on an examination of the structure and identifying the lack of efficiency in the functional structure. According to TSE’s blog posts and YouTube videos about this major change in the organisational structure, they found that the functions that needed to work very closely with each other, such as social and PR, were not communicating and working together. Moreover, it became evident that a central strategy and the enforcement of one social media solution for all markets would not lead to the outcomes they expected and as a result the level of resource waste was high. In this new structure, employees work based on lean and agile principles and Scrum and Kanban frameworks. According to the new principles, all decisions should be data-driven and associated actions should be supported by sufficient data. One of the areas in which this becomes important is the process of adopting a new social media platform. In this regard, the Spain social media manager explains the process in adoption of a new social media platform such as Snapchat: “Everything [TSE] follows in processes is what we call the lean methodology. In everything we do, we start just providing a hypothesis, if we say we use this tool, we will increase our relevance for this amount, so we create what we call a minimum viable product [MVP], it is basically just the least we can do to validate this idea. For example, if we want to do this with Snapchat for example, we create just an account and we try to create some content for it and see how it goes in the cheapest possible way and the fastest possible way, so we can validate the idea... we never just dive into a huge channel before testing it.”

Notwithstanding the indispensability of this process in the adoption of new platforms, the challenge is not limited to this stage. It also applies to the content that is produced and shared on the platforms and the users’ behaviours significantly affect the practice. An example of such practice is the case of a campaign we observed on Facebook and in one of TSE’s blogs by the Australia and New Zealand social media manager.

The initial effort to test three ideas by Australia and New Zealand squad for a Christmas campaign did not yield much interest by the users. Analysing the data and utilising other sources of data, the team changed the idea of Christmas to holidays in January. Using Facebook’s ad targeting and Audience Insights functions, they were able to decide on the target audience with minimum cost through third party ads manager technology (Smartly). Subsequent to the initial success of the concept, they created the minimum viable product (MVP) for the whole year, the MVP performed well and received the attention of the large media outlets as well. The social media manager asserts this is due to the use of data and validations before the large-scale implementation (notes based on netnography and documents).

In addition, collaboration and knowledge sharing are key in the new working system, which occur both offline and online. The former is in the form of daily standup or weekly meetings with the members of a
Adoption of new technologies: the facilities

TSE has adopted a range of technologies that are configured to form the facilities and infrastructure that supports the social media work practices. This infrastructure includes a variety of the specialised technologies for paid and non-paid social media work practices to facilitate performing of the activities. For the non-paid work practices, this includes Sprinklr, Tableau and Google Analytics that are used primarily by the social media managers to plan, run and analyse the activities on the social media platforms. The France social media manager explains: “You have data that you can have from the platform, so, Facebook has an analytics tool, Twitter has an analytics tool, Instagram doesn’t anymore, and Pinterest does that as well... you have all the traffic data that we get, so we use Google Analytics. We use a tool called Tableau that helps us measure the traffic. And the reporting tool we have for social media platforms is called Sprinklr, that’s what we use as well for scheduling the content, so, they have a good reporting tool, it’s quite big and comprehensive.”

This observation is related to not only the openness of the technologies that can be accessed and adapted by other digital artefacts, but also the necessity of measuring all the activities of social media work practices in a systematic manner. Moreover, there are a range of technologies adopted for the paid social media work practices in addition to Facebook ads platform including Smartly, Appsflyer, and Tableau. However, in the paid part, there is heterogeneity in the activities based on the development stage of each social media platform (Twitter, Pinterest, etc.), which incurs challenges for the social media advertising executives.

Mutability of the New Work Practices

The ongoing use of technologies and the recurrent enactment of these work practices are neither fixed nor stabilised. These work practices are constantly changing in response to the changes in the technology or unanticipated users’ behaviours (due to interactivity and networked structures of social media) and thus, they are inherently mutable. The Europe social media manager noted day-to-day changes in social media work practices: “Things change all the time, that could be a change in Facebook algorithm or it could be external factors.... But generally social media activity is changing every day, there is a new app that comes out and you might want to try it, or you might not. But still it’s good to be aware of what’s there.... And certainly in this company, an understanding of different cultures and the needs of users in each market, because they are very very different”.

As he explained, not only the activities change as a result of changes in the technology or external factors, but the necessity of understanding the users’ behaviours in different cultures contradicts the uniform system of actions to guide the activities that constitute the work practices of social media managers. Therefore, social media managers are constantly innovating and improvising particularly when responding to users. This innovation and improvisation is of great importance, because the improvisation of social media managers in such cases can turn the situation to a substantially important opportunity that can go viral (e.g. the case of the UK and Ireland social media manager in responding to a user’s complaint that positively went viral) or provide an interesting source of content.

Besides the behaviour of users, the dynamics of social media technologies play a crucial role in social media managers’ work practices. These changes include the emergence of new platforms and changes in the features and functions of existing platforms. The impact of such changed has been described by the Germany social media manager as a state of “staying on your toes”. Also, the social media managers noted platforms’ changing algorithms and how the dynamic nature of the algorithms influences the outcome of their work practices and the necessity for constant re-evaluating and re-thinking of the associated activities.

This can significantly influence the nature of social media managers’ work practices and the outcome of such work practices. This is highlighted in the Spain social media manager’s account of the Facebook algorithm and how Facebook’s promotion of visual content (videos) affected the measurement of their activities: “I have a real example. A year ago, we saw a huge drop in ‘reach’ in the Spanish market and we didn’t know why this was happening, because we started to check the engagement rates and they were...
Emergence and Mutability of Social Media Work Practices

still high. So, we asked Facebook and they really didn’t know why.... At that time, we found out that they try to move people from engagement more to videos. So, we started to publish more videos and visual content and the 'reach' at the end started to grow”.

As particular types of digital artefacts, social media technologies and their unique characteristics bring forth constant changes in the associated work practices in the organisations. These recurrent changes in technology and the way that consumers use the platforms counter the regularisation and routinisation of these work practices as the organisational actors are continuously improvising or reflecting on their actions to adapt to the new conditions. Therefore, work practices live in a state of instability that renders them mutable.

Discussion and Expected Contributions

In our study of organisational social media use in relation to consumers, we have found that the recurrent use of such technologies by organisations brings forth the emergence of new work practices in the flow of organisational work practices by creating new knowledge and expertise (new organisational roles), new organising arrangements and norms (new working mechanisms) and new infrastructure (adoption of other new technologies). This addresses the recent call by Aral et al. (2013) for more in-depth investigation of ‘social media management’ practice by organisations and also builds on more recent studies on the importance of corporate investments in social media management such as adoption of social media management technologies (Benthau et al. 2016; Risius and Beck 2015). Therefore, our study contributes to these quantitative studies by explaining how the practice of social media management occurs in organisations.

Organisational actors are continuously innovating in addressing diverse users’ needs and behaviours on social media (e.g. responding to users or utilising the user generated content) and various ways of using new functions and features of the technology (different social media platforms). This is related to idiosyncratic properties of these technologies as digital artefacts particularly editability, interactivity and networked structure (Kallinikos et al. 2013), which makes them open to many more possibilities of users’ behaviours than previous forms of IT. On the other hand, these organisational actors are also continuously engaged in reflecting on the outcome of their activities and questioning their assumptions to make decisions about the adoption of new social media platforms or changes in the use of current ones. The ongoing use of social media by the expert organisational actors is an act of constant interplay between improvisation and reflexive actions. This state of consciousness and constant reflection highlight the role of these actors’ agency (Ellway and Walsham 2015) in purposefully changing their work practices. The reflexive behaviour of the actors in our study has been developed and evolved as the organisation adjusted structurally toward different organising arrangements and as they adopted and configured other types of technologies toward more effectively conducting associated activities.

Thus, there is a co-constitution between this reflexive behaviour and development of the organising arrangements and infrastructure as organisational actors have been provided with structural conditions in “production, reproduction and transformation of their work processes” (Gorli et al. 2015, p. 3) and become more reflexive. The constant shift between improvising and reflexive acting brings forth the mutability of work practices, which has been described by one of the social media managers as a state of “staying on your toes”. Although the changes might not be drastic, the ongoing enactment of work practices through improvising and reflexive acts yields continuous changes and thus, the floating structure of social media management that does not stabilise, rather is unceasingly adapted and adjusted. Therefore, our study will extend practice based studies of technology and organisation (Orlikowski 2000; Schultze and Orlikowski 2004) by showing that a new form of technology such as social media can lead to the emergence of new work practices that are inherently mutable as a result of constant improvising and reflexive acts of organisational actors in response to the dynamics of the technology or users’ behaviours, which renders the structure of social media management in flux.

Our study also presents important practical contribution by portraying how large organisations implement the management of social media from establishing the expertise and infrastructure to the ways that these resources can be organised that result in the emergence of new work practices.
Emergence and Mutability of Social Media Work Practices

References


