Social Conceptualizations of Technology Structuring: A Comparative Analysis of Wikis at Two Global Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The widespread adoption and use of social media in almost every aspect of our daily lives may outpace existing empirical understandings. In organizations, social media are increasingly used by professional individuals and communities to support dynamic collaboration and knowledge sharing. While there is a growing amount of research on this subject, still little is known on how people use different kinds of social media in practice. That is, there is a need for an empirical understanding that addresses actual use practices of social media within the formal boundaries of organizations. To this end, we report on results from a qualitative comparative study of the use of wikis at two global organizations. Our aim is to develop an empirical understanding of the enactment of structures and the ways by which people structure and organize their wiki use practices by drawing on Orlikowski’s (2000) practice lens. The findings from the authors’ analysis suggest a number of enacted structures that reflect diverse wiki use practices. The main contribution centers on developing three key mechanisms that provide means for understanding the structuring of the use of technology.

Keywords: Collaboration, Community, Organization, Practice, Structure, Wiki

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media in organizations is becoming increasingly common. Many scholars have suggested that the social media might reduce managerial control and flatten organizational hierarchies (Bibbo et al., 2010; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Stenmark, 2008), transform and democratize knowledge exchange (Hasan & Pfaff, 2007; Aral et al., 2013; Bibbo et al., 2010), accelerate innovation and product development (Zwass, 2010), and so on. Most interestingly for us, a dominant theme across these studies has been the suggestion that formal organizational structures might be altered by new social media, and notably that the hierarchical structures that determine authority relations, information flows, and mechanisms of control and coordination in organizations (Zammuto et al., 2007) might be transformed. But how social media may enable such transformation is not yet examined (Majchrzak et
al., in press) and current literature offers limited insights into organizational use of social media (Jarrahi & Sawyer, 2013).

Other scholars have cautioned that the new social media and existing organizational structures are at least potentially incompatible. Hence, Grudin and Poole (2010) pointed to the tension that might exist in the interplay between wikis and organizations. They discussed the typical hierarchic character of large enterprises and suggested that it is naturally incompatible with the malleable character of a technology promoting open, flexible collaboration. Similar findings are offered by Yeo and Arazy (2012) and Macnamara & Zerfass (2012).

This caution is also evidenced by Huang et al. (2013) who suggested that organizations often tend to make adjustments to the use of social media so that it satisfies their governing principles. In the specific case of wikis, it has been suggested that they are often not used as initially intended (Martine et al., 2013). Holtzblatt et al. (2010) found that people are largely reluctant to use wikis for sharing information or editing content made by others because of dominant work practices and cultural sensitivities at the workplace. Other related perspectives refer to contradictory influences of social media (e.g., Hildebrand et al. 2013; Majchrzak et al., in press) implying that their use in organizations is ambivalent.

Nevertheless, it is still unclear how wikis are used in practice and how they may affect or transform organizations (Jarrahi & Sawyer, 2013; Majchrzak et al., in press; Martine et al., 2013; Saldanha & Krishnan, 2012; Stocker et al., 2009). Most social media studies have only focused on a few key themes related to categories of use (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) which for the most part are conceptual speculations (Jarrahi & Sawyer, 2013; Treem & Leonard, 2012), potential of social media for innovation, creativity and democratization (Hasan & Pfaff, 2007; Shirky, 2008), and the potential to create and sustain social network ties (Ellison et al., 2011). We believe that what is largely missing is an understanding of wiki use practices inside formal, established organizations. That is to say, there is a need for an in-depth understanding that primarily focuses on wiki use practices in order to examine how people structure and organize these practices in relation while using a wiki at the workplace.

Our aim in this paper is to provide that empirical understanding. So we seek an answer to the following questions: what kinds of structures are enacted when using a wiki in an organizational setting, and what enables the enactment of these structures? In order to achieve our aim and questions, we performed a qualitative comparative study of two global organizations that employ wikis at the workplace using Orlikowski’s (2000) practice lens for studying technology use. We look specifically at the enactment of structures or, technologies-in-practice, that describe different ways of using technology. The main contribution of the paper is providing means to explain the variations in wiki use practices by describing a number of mechanisms that underlie the enactment of structure.

ORGANIZATIONAL USE OF WIKIS

A wiki is often described as a simple technology that allows for organic, incremental, open and collaborative development of content (Cunningham, 2004). It consists of a set of interrelated web pages that are continually and iteratively improved (Happel & Treitz, 2008; Wagner, 2004; Yates et al., 2010).

The functioning of a wiki centers on the idea of communities, that is, wikis are basically designed to promote and support collaboration by any community of individuals (Bibbo et al., 2010). One key affordance of wikis that make this possible is the collaborative publishing of content (Majchrzak et al., 2013). This allows many people to co-write and co-edit wiki content (Hasan & Pfaff, 2007) and also engage in knowledge shaping practices. Shaping is a distinctive affordance of wikis and describes the iterative, cumulative and organic nature of knowledge contributions, supporting the integration, organization and rewriting of content (Majchrzak et al., 2013; Yates et al., 2010).
