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Social Media and the Emergence of *Reflexiveness* as a New Capability for Open Strategy

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Social media increases *transparency* and *inclusiveness* in organizational strategizing by widening engagement with strategy content and participants. However, our study shows that just relying on the feedback features of social media is not sufficient for an open strategy approach. Instead, emergent feedback from social media use leads to tensions initially between the participatory nature of the technology and extant management practices. Ultimately, these tensions encourage the development of new internal capabilities to appropriate feedback structurally into the organization. We conceptualize the emergence of this new organizational capability as *reflexiveness*. Further, we suggest that it is the development of this capability that, along with *transparency* and *inclusiveness*, explain the shift towards more open forms of strategizing and the potential to move organizations towards *stewardship*, as a governance model more consistent with open strategizing practices in organizations.

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Introduction

Strategy is both a statement of intent and a process by which that intent is formed and performed by members of organizations. The ownership of these two aspects of strategy has traditionally been with elite groups within organizations (Hambrick, 2007; Pettigrew, 1992). However, the rise of social media as a platform for open communication and wider engagement in organizational discourse has shifted attention to more collective views of strategy (Seidl and Whittington, 2014; Whittington, 2006).

Formalized strategy may still be managed from the top in many organizations but social media is adding pressure to make this process more porous and open to informal activity at the grassroots level and throughout (and even beyond) individual organizations. This is particularly relevant as the younger generation of “digital natives” (Helsper and Eynon, 2009) become more dominant given their aptitude to use social media to engage and interact with others (Tams et al., 2014; Vodanovich et al., 2010) and share knowledge (Morton et al., 2015).

The participative nature of social media changes the distribution of rhetorical resources and reshapes patterns of communication from univocal into multivocal organizational environments (Huang et al., 2015). Social media is intrinsic to knowledge management (Von Krogh, 2012), knowledge reuse (Majchrzak et al., 2013), distributed leadership (Sutanto et al., 2011), and in facilitating interaction and internal collaboration (Razmerita et al., 2014). However, it is the increased visibility of what others know through social media that creates conditions to leverage knowledge in new ways and promotes learning as a process that operates vicariously rather than through interpersonal experience (Leonardi, 2014). This is significant to strategy because of how social media accentuates the role and voice of every member of the organization by providing a platform for engagement and participation, as well as a more visible line of sight to strategy (Haefliger et al., 2011). Social media can have therefore the ability to extend reach and richness in the making and ‘doing’ of strategy. In particular, social media has the potential to modify ‘how much’ strategy is visible, and when and how individuals are able to participate in creating and shaping practices and content of strategic significance. It adds reach and volume of feedback ex-ante, but often also replaces traditional forms of communication of extant strategy.

It is therefore appropriate to broaden our view of strategy to include a wider set of activities with strategic impact within organizations, some of which have not been recognized as being sufficiently close to the practice of strategy (Bechky, 2011).

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This broader view of strategy reflects the growing number of modern work environments where strategy practice is shifting from being “exclusive and secretive” to becoming more “inclusive and transparent” (Whittington et al., 2011, p. 538). The issue is then how increasing *inclusiveness* (broader involvement of stakeholders) and *transparency* (wider access to content and information) interferes with established conventions around *who* should be involved in strategy and *how*, and the extent of *what* should be shared. For example, becoming more inclusive can challenge established hierarchical structures within organizations (Collier et al., 2004) and break with established conventions on strategy being the domain of a restricted group of top managers (Hambrick, 2007; Pettigrew, 1992) by opening-up the potential involvement to other echelons in the organization, notably middle managers (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990). Adding transparency can also be problematic because it creates conditions for equal voice and access to rhetorical resources by all members of the organization (Huang et al., 2013), challenging for example the status of middle management because they no longer moderate and intermediate knowledge exchanges. This echoes Bruhn and Ahlers (2013), who note the importance of integrating and embedding new communication channels in existing organizational and strategizing practices and processes.

This is causing significant changes to strategy as conventionally described; changes that go deep into the praxis of strategy, its norms and artefacts, as well as who is involved in formal and informal strategic activity in organizations (Whittington, 2006; Whittington et al., 2006, 2011). However this leads to further ramifications to the democratization of strategy by establishing agile, responsive and capable organizations (Doz and Kosonen, 2008a, 2008b), crowdsourcing strategy dialogues (Stieger et al., 2012) and more democratized forms of strategy (Dobusch and Mueller-Seitz, 2012; Matzler et al., 2014; Stieger et al., 2012).

This paper focuses on social media as a platform for participation (Cotton et al., 1988) and considers its role in shaping and forming strategy within organizations (Mantere and Vaara, 2008). We pose the following guiding research question to deepen our understanding of this research puzzle: *How is the adoption of social media changing the nature of organizational strategizing?*

The paper is structured as follows. In this section we motivated the study by highlighting the role of social media in shaping strategic activity in organizations. Next we show how social media is changing the nature and dynamics of processes of strategizing in organizations and identify the research gap in our current understanding that we aim to address. The section that follows outlines our methodological approach to the empirical work by explaining the two stages undertaken to gather and analyse secondary and primary data. This two-pronged approach allowed us to intertwine a wide range of data from multiple sources with the concepts of open participation in organizational strategizing. We then report on our main findings, providing evidence of tensions and capability development in the organizations studied. In our analysis section we then review and conceptualize the dynamic nature of capability development by adding *reflexiveness* as a third dimension to Whittington et al.'s (2011) model of open strategy. Drawing on Gorli et al. (2015), we suggest that this capability embodies the process of integrating open and emergent feedback into the structural arrangements of organizations. Our conceptualization of the *reflexiveness* capability is a key contribution of our study. Lastly, we reflect on the potential for this capability to shift the governance of the organization towards *stewardship* as an overall organizational arrangement that is consistent with open-strategizing practices in organizations.

Social media expansion into processes of strategizing

We commenced with a systematic and comprehensive review of case material publicly available such as blog posts, online magazines, news, industry reports, company reports, white papers, etc. This gave us a broad basis to understand the emerging use of social media in organizations. More particularly, the aim was to capture salient, current examples of the expansion of social media into processes of strategizing. This was achieved by analysing the social media features used (column 1) and their specific strategic use (column 2) and to capture the effect on strategic activity (column 3). Table 1 shows a selection of representative examples of our initial analysis:

Our analysis revealed various ways in which particular social media features are being used in strategizing. It also revealed that social media were used in combination or at times were replacing traditional approaches to strategy development that had often been based previously on paper communication and face-to-face meetings. This analysis showed a wide range of social media features being used within organizations such as blogging platforms, commenting, activity streaming, social networking, internal twitter, videocasting, online forums and chats, wiki editing, voting systems, ideation and collaborative platforms. It showed that these online services were increasingly used to engage employees in organizational activity and decision making (Razmerita et al., 2014). In certain cases, social media were more deeply embedded, and effectively replaced traditional forms of organizational participation, and in this way social media became a significant influencing factor over the strategic outlook of these organizations (Haefliger et al., 2011).

In these organizations, strategic activity was shifting from “analogue” processes based on traditional tools, such as workshopping, stakeholder meetings, corporate events and sharing documents (Whittington, 2006; Whittington et al., 2006), towards new “digital” forms of strategic engagement and participation based on social media (Stieger et al., 2012). Figure 1 captures this finding by showing the increasing influence of social media over traditional approaches to managing strategy (Haefliger et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014; Whittington, 2006; Whittington et al., 2011). The concentric circles represent this gradual integration and often replacing in the use of social media in strategic activity in organizations. As per the examples shown in Table 1, the figure also highlights the way in which social media shifts attention from an approach to strategizing focused on tools and outcomes, towards an approach more based on strategy conversations, connectedness and engagement.

These findings motivated us to analyse the effects of participation through social media on organizational strategizing. In other words, to explore further this shift towards more participative forms of engagement and its potential to open-up

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