Community-based evaluation in online communities

Considering the materiality of (making) "best practice"

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Abstract

Purpose – The idea of "best practice" is very much built into information systems and the ways in which they organise and structure work. The purpose of this paper is to examine how "best practice" may be identified (produced) through a community-based evaluation process as opposed to traditional expert-based evaluation frameworks. The paper poses the following research questions: how does "best practice" (e)valuation in online communities differ depending on whether they are produced by community members or experts? And what role play these two practices of valuation for online community performance?

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a three-year ethnographic study of a large-scale online community initiative run by the European Commission. Participant observation of online and offline activities (23 events) was complemented with 73 semi-structured interviews with 58 interviewees. The paper draws on Science and Technology Studies, and in particular actor-network theory.

Findings – Promoting the idea of "best practice" is not just an exercise about determining what "best" is but rather supposes that best is something that can travel across sites and be replicated. The paper argues that it is crucial to understand the work performed to coordinate multiple practices of producing "best practice" as apparatuses of valuation. Hence if practices are shared or circulate within an online community, this is possible because of material-discursive practices of dissociation and association, through agential cuts. These cuts demarcate what is important – and foregrounded – and what is backgrounded. In so doing new "practice objects" are produced.

Research limitations/implications – The research was conducted in the European public sector where participants are not associated through shared organisational membership (e.g. as employees of the same organisation). An environment for determining "best practice" that is limited to an organisation's employees and more homogeneous may reveal further dynamics for "best practice" production.

Practical implications – This paper sheds light on why it is so difficult to reach commensuration in crowd-sourced environments.

Originality/value – The paper provides an analysis of how online community members collaborate in order to identify relevant and meaningful user-generated content. It argues that "best practice" is produced through a process of commensuration.

Keywords Communities of practice, Evaluation, Actor-network theory, Case study, Ethnography, Practice, Web 2.0, eGovernment, Collective intelligence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Practice-based studies on information systems have recognised that "practice" is endlessly local (e.g. Monteiro *et al.*, 2012; Vaast and Walsham, 2009; Thompson, 2011; Nandhakumar and Baskerville, 2006; Schultze and Boland, 2000). Since the early 1990s practice-based studies have promoted a concept of practice as "situated learning" that takes place in local participation frameworks (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Practices are seen to be "radically situated" (Suchman, 2005) and to have "local identities" (Mol, 2003). They are "necessarily

bound up with the material means through which they are performed" (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012, p. 113).

In contrast, the notion of "best practice" invokes the idea of mobility and transfer, the disentanglement of practices from local networks and the material means through which they are enacted. The very rationale for identifying what best is, is based on the assumption that something can (and usually ought to) be replicated – hence can be moved from one location to another, from one context to another. This mobile notion of "best practice" is very much built into the ways in which information systems organise and structure work; how they facilitate the stretching or bridging of (organisational) boundaries and prompt practice sharing, transfer and replication. The idea of "best practice" is pervasive in management studies, in particular knowledge management and organisational learning but also outside of academia (Löffler, 2000; O'Dell and Grayson, 1998; Wellstein and Kieser, 2011). In many studies "best practice" is considered something that may be discovered or identified amongst the practices of a "community of practice" (Bobrow and Whalen, 2002; Kimble, 2006) or a "network of practice" (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Griffith and Sawyer, 2006; Vaast and Walsham, 2009). "Best practice" is seen as a passive container that may circulate a community or network, it is regarded as an "objectified transferable commodity" (Gherardi, 2000, p. 213) which may be shared.

"Best practice" may be described as a translation of situated practices into circulating entities; it makes transient, social relations tangible and translates local and situated accounts into standardised objects. These standardised objects are comparable; they can be evaluated and ranked. The interest in social valuation and evaluation practices has grown in the past decade (Lamont, 2012; Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). And although most studies are mainly concerned with human agency and neglect the increasingly important role of information and communication technologies in valuation; a growing number of scholars have begun to attend to the material entanglements of (e) valuation and analyse the (socio-)materiality of algorithmic or crowd-based valuation practices (Orlikowski and Scott, 2014, 2015; Pollock, 2012; Introna, 2015)[1]. In line with this strand of research this paper proposes a conceptualisation of "best practice" not as an independently existing entity (or practice) but rather as the performative outcome of material-discursive valuation practices.

The ways in which practices of valuation are performed have changed profoundly since they moved into online environments (Orlikowski and Scott, 2014). What is of particular interest in online settings is how commensurability may be accomplished, how measuring by the same standard is or becomes possible. Yet, as Orlikowski and Scott (2014) point out, the "valuation literature has not recognized the significant reconfiguring of valuation practices being performed by online apparatuses" (p. 889). This is surprising as the sharing of opinions, advice and recommendations that evaluate and rank a range of products and services are a distinct feature of social media networks and online communities (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012). Commensuration and valuation practices are vital for the performance of such forms of organising as they reduce complexity and allow for coordination across multiple sites, for example, with respect to books (Scott and Orlikowski, 2015), hospitality (Orlikowski and Scott, 2014; Scott and Orlikowski, 2012), restaurants (Blank, 2007), healthcare or schooling (Williamson, 2015).

With this paper I contribute to the growing body of valuation literature by analysing the materiality of commensuration and evaluation practices that are entangled in a web of differing sociotechnical assemblages. Different to other social media evaluation schemes on books, restaurants or hotels is "best practice" a community product itself. Hence whereas studies on hospitality evaluation start from a given product or service, is "best practice" produced by the very same people that subsequently ought to evaluate it. This paper's specific contribution lies in analysing how – what is meant to be compared – is produced by

the evaluating subjects. It also analyses how these valuation practices configure the performance of online communities and membership. More specifically, this paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How does "best practice" (e)valuation in online communities differ depending on whether they are produced by community members or experts?

RQ2. And what role play these two practices of valuation for online community performance?

The research is based on a three-year ethnographic study of ePractice, a European Commission initiative to further knowledge sharing across a pan-European community via a web portal that comprises online and offline activities, and in doing so, strongly promotes social media usage. Over the duration of the fieldwork 140,000 people registered as members to ePractice, over 1,550 "ePractice good practice cases" were submitted. Of interest to this paper is how "best practice" is identified amongst the "good practice case studies". Two aspects of the materiality of "best practice" will be discussed: the practices involved for producing commensurability between local eGovernment practices and the practices involved in evaluating the seemingly commensurate entities.

The paper is structured in the following way: first, the development of notions such as "best practice" and "good practice sharing" are reviewed. The following section reviews valuation as material-discursive practices. Subsequently the paper's methodology and research methods are introduced. In the paper the empirical data are presented along the life cycle of "ePractice good practice cases". As stated above the empirical section will first look at the ways in which ePractice aims to translate local eGovernment projects into "good practice case studies" that circulate the community; second, the empirical section presents how "best practice" amongst those circulating practices is aimed to be identified through community-based and expert-based evaluation procedures. The paper concludes with a discussion on how the translation of practices as well as the evaluation of "best practice" serve as means to coordinate across sites in distributed organisations, and where and why friction may occur. In particular, the paper argues that differences between these commensuration and evaluation practices are not to be found in the interpretations of "best practice" but are rather the results of particular material-discursive, boundary-making practices.

Literature review and theoretical framework: determining "best practice" through commensuration mechanisms

The idea of "best practice" is very much situated in the project of boosting organisational learning and furthering knowledge management. Pivotal to this development was Brown's and Duguid's (1991) now seminal article in which they took the concept of "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) into a business context. Whereas Lave and Wenger focussed on how newcomers learn through a process of active engagement in community practices (using ethnographic studies of butchers, Mayan midwives and Liberian tailors), Brown and Duguid (1991) discussed how improvised, new practices develop within relatively homogeneous groups of practitioners (experts) in the corporate world. With the rise of ICT-based knowledge management systems, new forms of organising emerged and ICT systems became associated with the ability to spread practice (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Hara and Foon Hew, 2007; Vaast and Walsham, 2009). Hence the notion of "best practice" invokes the idea of mobility and transfer, the disentanglement of practices from local networks and the material means through which they are enacted.

One of the first projects to identify and circulate "best practice" was the EUREKA project at XEROX that aimed to enable and enhance knowledge sharing amongst XEROX's photocopy repair technicians with several phases in different countries and a subsequent

global roll-out. The starting point of the project was that much of the informal or "tacit" knowledge "remains embedded in practice" within "small circles of colleagues and work groups" that "share crucial steps in a new practice and fresh solutions of recalcitrant problems through conversations and stories, with members filling in the background and gaps from their own experience" (Bobrow and Whalen, 2002, p. 47). The insights from studies such as Orr's (1996), Lave's and Wenger's (1991) and Brown's and Duguid's (1991) led to aspirations towards how organisations may facilitate and further the identification and sharing of good or best practice beyond these local groups:

> Organizations face the challenge of somehow converting this valuable but mainly local knowledge into forms that other members of the organization can understand and perhaps most important, act on (Bobrow and Whalen, 2002, p. 47).

What a project such as EUREKA struggled with was the extent to which the informal and local talking and telling could be formalised and even centrally managed. Overall it was anticipated (or aspired) that the EUREKA system could serve as a representation of the informal relationships between community members. Instead of stories that the technicians exchanged during their breaks, knowledge in form of tips was meant to circulate the wider community (or network). Hereby knowledge came to be regarded as a thing (or entity) that can circulate in a community rather than as something embedded in the stories that were part of the problem-solving skills of the technicians that Orr had reported on. EUREKA tips were seen to be a container or vehicle for the knowledge and experience of the technicians. McDermott (1996) criticised this container metaphor:

> Context refers to an empty slot, a container, into which other things are placed. It is the "con" that contains the "text", the bowl that contains the soup. As such, it shapes the contours of its contents; it has its effects only at the borders of the phenomenon under analysis. […] The soup does not shape the bowl and the bowl most certainly does not alter the substance of the soup (p. 282).

The learner is seen to be a passive container in which knowledge is entered. Subsequently "text and context, soup and bowl […] all can be analytically separated and studied on their own without doing violence to the complexity of their situation. A static sense of context delivers a stable world" (McDermott, 1996) that is neatly separable in world-subject, organisation-individual, body-mind, subject-knowledge or action-thought (Gherardi, 2000; Østerlund and Carlile, 2005):

> As if it were food or money, this perspective implies, knowledge exists prior to and independent from the knowing subject, who creates no knowledge in the act of appropriation. That is, the production, circulation and consumption of knowledge are viewed as autonomous activities (Gherardi, 2000, p. 212).

Subsequently knowledge became a strategic good that needed to be managed from the top of an organisation; it became an "objectified transferable commodity" (p. 213) as has been seen in the EUREKA example. Yet Lave (2011) is sceptical about this:

> The contexts of people's lives aren't merely containers or backdrops, nor are they simply whatever seems salient to immediate experience. Persons are always embodied, located uniquely in space, and in their relations with other persons, things, practices, and institutional arrangements (p. 152).

Similarly Orr (2006) argued that it was unlikely that a system such as EUREKA could be able to "replace more local and informal means of circulating information" (p. 1807). There were of course other obstacles: informal talk is not easily translated into a "tip database" (Bobrow and Whalen, 2002, p. 52). Orr (2006) pointed out that one of the unanticipated problems was that "technicians did not all find it natural to write, nor did they find it natural to abstract segments of their experience" (p. 1807).

In order to accommodate the circulation and sharing of practices in these new forms of organising, Brown and Duguid (2001) coined the term "networks of practice" which comprised many of the new features of collaborative work through the internet such as that face-to-face interaction was not a prerequisite for collaboration anymore, that members may never meet and do not necessarily know (of) each other. Knowledge is shared following the "routes prepared by practice" and made possible through "common embedding circumstances" (p. 203). Vaast and Walsham (2009) propose the notion of "trans-situated learning" which accounts for the coming together of practitioners "through electronically mediated means to interact on issues related to their practices" (p. 548).

Many of those networks of practice quickly reach a number of shared "practices" (e.g. in form of tips in a tip database) that some kind of identification of the "most useful" or "most relevant" entries was required. And although the above-cited studies attended to how practices may circulate and spread within online communities or "networks of practice", they have not attended to how such practice tokens are being categorised and ranked within the networks in which they emerged; how the identification and negotiation of the "most valuable" or "most relevant" contributions take place. It is this gap which this paper addresses and to which it contributes through its empirical material and through its review and analysis of sociomaterial frameworks for considering evaluation and commensuration practices.

Commensuration and evaluation practices may be seen as an ordering device for community building as they allow for ordering in time and space by making transient, social relations tangible and by facilitating mobility and circulation through its capability of transcending and bridging community boundaries. The notion of technology as a practical means to transcend and bridge community boundaries may be found in the idea of "action at a distance" (Latour, 1987) which has been made possible through inventions that enhanced the "mobility, stability and combinability" of networks (p. 225).

Only through circulation sociality in online communities becomes possible as social networks form and are performed through the continuous circulation of knowledge objects, travelling practices, moving people and moving imaginaries that "carry connections across" (Urry, 2004, p. 28). The enactment of objects that can circulate is vital for the performance of online communities. They are not solely performed through the connecting and relating of distant participants but "something has to circulate too. There has to be movement between the points of action at a distance and mobilisation to be possible" (Callon and Law, 2004, p. 4). Latour (2004, 2007) argued that the social is about circulation; it is the association of materially diverse entities and their circulation.

Long and strong networks, so Latour (1987), are generated and made possible through "immutable and combinable mobiles" (p. 227). Latour's examples for such immutable mobiles are maps (for discovering the world), forms (for noting down astronomical data) and questionnaires (for conducting a census). These objects solve a number of logistical and practical problems; they redefine centres and peripheries and assemble new networks of heterogeneous entities. With the widespread use of computer has the "handling, the combination, the mobility, the conservation and the display of the traces [be] fantastically" enhanced (Latour, 1987, p. 228). New forms of "immutable mobiles" have been generated and opened up "the *possibility* of ordering distant events" (Law, 1994, p. 103, emphasis in original).

In general, there are two alternative forms of evaluation in online networks, which are also relevant for the case study presented in this paper: expert-based evaluation and community- or crowd-based evaluation. Expert evaluation mainly operates within more or less well-defined standards or categories according to which a given good, product, service or organisation is evaluated. In contrast user-based evaluation raises questions on whether measuring "by the same standard" is at all possible (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012, p. 113). For both forms commensuration of the phenomena or objects to be ranked or evaluated are key.

Crucial within online communities is not only that circulating entities (such as scorecards) or "best practices" are being recognised as being similar (or the same) but that some kind of commensuration mechanism supports navigation and facilitates evaluation, and in doing so enables circulation. Important for such ordering and coordination is the role of "practice objects" (such as case studies) as they allow making transient things (such as practices) tangible and mobile; they allow for "action at a distance".

Important is how these objects are being constituted; how they come to circulate an online community. Suchman (1987/2007), in following Barad, points out that it is very important to consider the boundary-making practices that produce particular objects:

> Boundaries are necessary for the creation of meaning and, for that very reason, are never innocent. Because the cuts implied in boundary making are always agentially positioned rather than naturally occurring, and because boundaries have real consequences (p. 285).

The ways in which particular circulating entities are being produced are hence important for the performance of online communities (and digital sociality). Online communities such as ePractice may be conceptualised as "apparatus" in the sense Barad (2007) uses the term: as a material-discursive, boundary-drawing practice. Such practices "are understood as specific material reconfigurings through which 'objects' and 'subjects' are produced" (p. 148). Apparatuses are "specific material (re)configurings of the world – which come to matter" (p. 140). Boundaries are enacted through "agential cuts" (Barad, 2007, p. 381). Barad illustrates this cut with the example of a person holding a stick. It can be said that the stick is either being observed by the person holding it (feeling its thickness, material, texture) or may be used to observe the surrounding (i.e. if the person is in a dark room and uses the stick to guide her). An agential cut is being made, so Barad, between the "agency of observation" and the "observed object": in the first instance the stick is the observed object, whereas in the second instance it is part of the agency of observation (a cyborg observer). Hence the boundaries and properties of component parts of any given phenomenon are only determined through the "agential cut" that delineates what the "measured object" is and what the "measuring agent" (Barad, 2007, p. 337). It follows that when boundaries are cut, objects/subjects are enacted intraactively. What is of interest is to see how, when and why "agential cuts cut things together and apart" (p. 381); how boundaries are performed.

Scott's and Orlikowski's (2012) study of the hospitality sector conveys that different agential cuts are enacted through user-based evaluation (TripAdvisor) and through expert-based evaluation (AA scheme). They argue that through commensuration "the same set of standard metrics" is imposed on a set of items:

> [Commensuration] both organizes and simplifies the information we have to analyze, while also reducing variability and eliminating nonstandard (often qualitative and contextual) information, for example, aesthetic look and feel, brand loyalty (p. 114).

In the case of the expert evaluation disparate forms of value are being translated into homogeneous units. This allows for "information reduction, uncertainty absorption, and simplification of decision-making" (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012, p. 115). Similarly, Pollock (2012) reports on the way in which the consultancy and tech research firm Gartner ranks IT companies. At Gartner experts use "audit trails" and "scoring sheets to demonstrate how you got to that point" (p. 98). These commensuration devices allow for effective boundary making, and hence allow for circulation.

Importantly are both modes of valuation or valuation practices organised in apparatuses which are performative (Orlikowski and Scott, 2014). Orlikowski and Scott (2014) show that "a focus on apparatus helps us see these [valuation practices] not as prescriptive aids to cognition but as performative practices that make a difference by making agential cuts that enact certain realities" (p. 888).

Case study

In the following empirical material will be presented that demonstrates how commensuration amongst diverse practices in eGovernment is meant to be achieved through a template to describe "good practice case studies" and how ranking orders amongst those "good practices" are established through expert- and community-based evaluation mechanisms. The case study will conclude by attending to the friction that these commensuration and evaluation practices produce.

This paper is based on a three-year "ethnographic study" (Neyland, 2008; Orr, 1996) of ePractice: a European Commission project to build a community of European eGovernment[2] practitioners. In June 2007 ePractice joined-up a number of legacy projects and the European Commission aimed to establish it as the European meeting place for eGovernment practitioners. In building and fostering a "European eGovernment community of practice", the aim of ePractice was to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience amongst "eGovernment practitioners" across Europe, and in so doing, building a European identity (Jarke, 2015). This was meant to be achieved through a web portal comprising a number of online and offline devices such as Web 2.0 features (e.g. public member web profiles, a community blog), a case study database, workshops and conferences. In January 2012 over 140,000 people had registered as members to ePractice, over 1,550 case studies had been submitted, and over 1,800 events had been announced.

With an initial user base of just under 5,000 individuals, ePractice grew exponentially throughout the period of my fieldwork. The service was free of charge and users typically worked within the realm of eGovernment: either as civil servants in the public sector, in the private sector (e.g. consulting firms) or academia. Via ePractice they were able to set up a profile, connect with others, describe their projects as "ePractice good practice cases", participate in theme-based communities, communicate and discuss via a blog, disseminate studies, activities and events; and also receive up-to-date information about eGovernment across Europe. Furthermore, there existed the opportunity to participate in eGovernment-related workshops and conferences. These workshops provided a more formal place for coming together in the form of working sessions, but also left considerable room for more informal coffee break and networking interaction.

Research approach and methods
Research setting and design. Science and Technology Studies (STS) has a strong methodological focus and through its employment as a conceptual framework it inevitably informs a study's methodology and choice of methods (e.g. Mitev, 2009). STS scholars have repeatedly argued that methods are not a way of capturing knowledge about the world, but rather a way of interacting with it: Law (2004/2008) pointed out that methods do not "*discover* and depict realities. Instead, it is that they participate in the *enactment* of those realities" (p. 45, emphasis in the original). Mol (2003) agrees:

> Knowledge should not be understood as a mirror image of objects that lie waiting to be referred to. Methods are not a way of opening a window on the world, but a way of interfering with it. They act, they mediate between an object and its representations (p. 155).

Hence taking an STS-stance does not only affect the way we conceptualise what we research but also the way we research: methods do not only affect the way we make sense of what we encounter but also shape what we encounter. It is therefore important to consider how a particular method interferes and possibly mediates with the world because not only the various actors are engaged in framing activities and cut their networks but the researcher as well.

The way my study is framed suggests a qualitative approach that attends to the practices, relations and processes related to the performance of community. Accordingly, my research project can be described as a process-oriented and practice-based study.

Access and data collection. Over a period of three years I studied ePractice's online and offline activities. I conducted a total of 73 semi-structured interviews with 58 interviewees, and attended 23 events, of which 15 were ePractice workshops and five were events conducted by eGovMeasureNet, a thematic network on eGovernment benchmarking and measurements. My involvement and roles in these events differed from participant observer to workshop rapporteur, to member of the Informal Expert Committee, to community presenter, to project staff of eGovMeasureNet, and community facilitator for eGovMeasureNet on ePractice. Regarding the selection of interviewees, I followed two different strategies:

(1) For the ePractice team which consists of the project officers from the European Commission and a consortium of consultants, I interviewed all relevant stakeholders. I interviewed most of these stakeholders several times in order to "capture" their (changing) perception of ePractice over time.

(2) Concerning the eGovernment practitioners, I met most of my interviewees at eGovernment-related workshops or was introduced to them by other practitioners. This was also important as I was interested in getting to know eGovernment practitioners that were engaged in EU-funded or European eGovernment projects but not "active" members of ePractice. I also selected interviewees that were good practice case authors via the ePractice portal based on their number of KUDOS[3] and the rating of their cases.

Many interviews involved references to websites, mailing lists, newsletters or other electronic resources. If I conducted interviews via Skype or telephone and the interviewees had access to the internet, they usually looked up the relevant content straightaway and sent links via e-mail or the Skype chat functionality. Many interviews (no matter whether face-to-face or distant) included follow-up e-mails in which interviewees sent relevant internet links (to events, newsgroups, articles, etc.), or contact details of further potential interview partners or documents (e.g. from their project documentation or national policies).

Overall, the formal interviews were seen as interactive accomplishments in which people were invited to reflect on their activities and practices related to their membership in ePractice and "good practice" sharing. During the interviews, many reflexive thoughts were revealed towards the ePractice project. People in the European Commission and the ePractice team were not just busy doing what there were doing, but notably took time to reflect about what they were doing, why and which impact that had on the overall project. They were also keen to hear my thoughts and preliminary results of the research. Meetings and coffee break talks were used as opportunities to become familiar with the ways in which participants made sense of particular phenomena.

Data structures and types
The data I gathered throughout the research were varied, and they were plentiful. This wealth of interview and observation data was complemented by data gathered on the ePractice portal in form of blog entries, comments of other users or ePractice team online accounts[4]. Furthermore the European Commission also made available some of their user statistics, project documentations and user surveys. Other publicly accessible data comprise policy documents and calls for tenders, as well as the *European Journal of ePractice*.

Most interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The length and focus of the interviews differed: some lasted about 30 minutes and were very structured. Others were rather unstructured coffee table talks of about two hours. The 30-minute interviews were transcribed in full length; the coffee table talks only in excerpts summarizing the "blurb". As new themes in the research emerged I went back to some of the summarised "blurb" sections and transcribed parts of them as they became of interest.

Some interviewees, however, did not feel comfortable with the voice recorder running, so I had to turn it off and take notes instead. Other times I switched off the voice recorder in the middle of the interview because my interviewees signalled discomfort in answering questions or elaborating a specific point in more detail if the recorder was turned on. Very often these topic areas included the collaboration and relationship between the interviewees and the European Commission: the interviewees felt more comfortable discussing certain issues "off the record". These notes were enriched with what I remembered and reflected upon after an interview.

I have also had numerous talks during workshop coffee breaks, on the way to the metro/train, when sharing a taxi, at conference dinners, during lunch breaks, etc. All these conversations have not been audio recorded and consent was not requested. Hence, these numerous insights and thoughts feature foremost in the way they have formed my understanding of the ePractice project.

Three types of visual data were collected in the research project: photographs taken at workshops or meetings, screen shots of websites and copies of workshop reports. All photographs were taken with participants' consent. They are publicly available in ePractice workshop reports.

Data analysis. The research data (transcripts, notes, photos) were organised and stored via the content management option of a qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti); and in addition, a literature management system (Citavi) for various reports and papers was used. I structured and analysed the interview data, field notes and observation notes with coding software. This was done by reading and re-reading the transcripts which were coded using open codes. Through these codes, themes emerged such as "good practice cases" or "community membership". For each theme a "network of codes" was created in which the different codes relevant to the theme were related (e.g. the code "reading a good practice case" was set into a qualified relation with other codes such as "translating in own work context" or "best practice"). The relevance and the qualification of the relation (e.g. supporting, distorting) was assessed based on the interview quotes that were associated with each of the codes. The networked codes or themes then allowed to gain a better understanding of how interviewees constructed "best practice" and how they participated in "good practice" sharing. These networks changed over the duration of the research project.

The long-term involvement with ePractice and the resulting longitudinal study allowed me to follow a proximal research design that studies ePractice as emergent and becoming. A specific focus was given to boundary work, for example: what is a good practice case and how is a good practice case performed, written, talked about, presented, rated, exchanged and assembled? Overall, the research methodology and design reflects the way of communicating and engaging with other individuals but also the materiality individuals find themselves part of (e.g. the numerous journeys to Brussels, the attention to online dynamics, and the importance of objects for circulation and as circulation devices).

Research findings

In the following I will present some of the key issues that emerged in the ePractice good practice exchange scheme by highlighting them along the life cycle of the good practice cases. First, I will offer a rationale for why and how the system of good practice cases was set-up, namely to facilitate European wide sharing of "good practice" in eGovernment via a community online database. Second, I outline how the experiences and local practices of ePractice members were translated into "good practice cases", in particular how eGovernment projects were described using a template that specified what was important to consider and account for and what not. Third, I will argue that the increase in the number

of such "good practice cases" in the database required a sorting or ranking mechanism of some kind in order to give ePractice members orientation. This ranking mechanism was implemented as a device for determining "best practice" – hence the eGovernment projects that provided the "highest quality" of insights and were "most relevant" to ePractice members. In the following two aspects are discussed how practice is made to and may travel in online communities, and what practices of circulation/travel practices emerge. In doing so the case study will attend to two different mechanisms for enabling circulation and facilitating ranking orders: expert evaluation and community evaluation.

Facilitating Europe-wide sharing of "good practice" in eGovernment. Practices cannot simply circulate within online networks and travel, because they are local by definition. A study commissioned by the European Commission about transferability of good practices in eGovernment suggested study tours to the sites of the actual projects because "the realities of innovation and change in the development of eGovernment on a wider scale represent a much more complicated mesh of events, activities and relationships" (European Commission, 2007, p. 55).

An alternative to study tours that were promoted by ePractice was the creation of an electronic, online "knowledge base". In the case of ePractice it featured "ePractice good practice cases". An "ePractice good practice case" was described as a "type of experience that explains the case by sharing thoughts and mistakes" (Knut, ePractice Project Officer). On the ePractice website the following definition may be found:

> ePractice.eu cases are written summaries of real-life projects or business solutions developed by public administrations, entrepreneurs and corporations. Case studies included in our portal are based on actual experiences, and reading them provides a picture of the challenges and dilemmas faced by the professionals working in eGovernment (Accessed on 9 March 2010, available at: www. epractice.eu/info/cases).

Interviews with eGovernment practitioners demonstrate a general feeling that their practices may be indeed shared through ePractice good practice cases if they are "applicable" and "transferable" to new environments. "Good practice" needs to "translate" into the reader's own work context; a reader needs to be able to "take out useful aspects and apply it" to their "own work". Hence the ability of good practice cases to travel and be transferred is seen to be depending on what Brown and Duguid (2001) have called "common embedding circumstances".

Writing "good practice": the "good practice case" template and its enactments. In 2005 the ePractice predecessor project eGovnerment Good Practice Framework (eGGPF) provided an opportunity to share experiences about eGovernment projects through its portal's database. eGovernment practitioners (e.g. civil servants working in the realm of eGovernment) could provide information about their eGovernment projects or initiatives in an HTML-based online text template. The emphasis for these "ePractice good practice cases" lays on "quantifiable" categories for evaluation purposes. What was needed – so the feeling – was a common template to describe good practices in eGovernment across Europe. The online "case template" was developed by the eGGPF team to facilitate the writing process but also to make good practice cases "quantifiable" and "measurable", and in doing so commensurable. This template was meant to give guidance and structure to the descriptions and "assure a basic quality level of the practices submitted" (case guidelines). It requested, amongst other things, a short description (abstract), the project's scope, its target audience, the technical and management approach, the policy relevance, and lessons learnt. A word limit was given for each of the sections. ePractice adopted this approach and further promoted these categories as they were seen to be "of high interest to the ePractice community" (case guidelines). The following figure provides a screenshot of the HTML template (Figure 1).

Note: Retrieved on 12 January 2012

The structure or frame that a template provides was seen positively by case authors and readers alike:

> What I found very useful is that the ePractice presentation of the projects is somehow divided in different sections, so that the people who are trying to promote their cases through this ePractice community can follow this pattern and this pattern then can, how to say, focus them, what is relevant and what is important for a case presentation, so I found this quite useful (Marko, NGO, Slovenia).

Others experienced this framing of their eGovernment project as a constraint rather than "useful":

> One of the problems I had was in having to calculate how many words I had to use, because, you know, when we were following the case [template], [it] was indicating a maximum number of words in each paragraph, and sometimes the maximum number for me was not enough. Or sometimes it was too much. So having to adapt my content, what I wanted to say, with the

limit that was indicated and imposed by the case structure was a bit difficult, so I had to try on a word document to write what I wanted to write, and then to make it fit, and count the words and then copy it into the case, and that was a bit complicated (Maria, civil servant regional government, Italy).

Case authors such as Maria felt that the template "imposes" a structure and constrains them. Subsequently practitioners create an MS-Word document to frame their content according to the constraints of the template; they frame "what they want to say" in order for it to fit the case template structure. The use of an MS-Word document was also driven by another motivation: the need to collaborate with colleagues in the writing and editing of a ePractice case study. Information needs to be gathered from colleagues and collaborators throughout an organisation; MS-word documents are created and circulated amongst these participants. This information needs to be compiled, ordered, reviewed and edited in order to comply with the online template provided by ePractice:

[b]ecause different people had to provide input, check that what I was writing was correct, etc. And I guess, that this is the standard procedure once you publish a case, esp. from public sector organisations (Comment left on ePractice blog on 31 May 2010).

We use the template of the case provided by ePractice, you have to fill in the questionnaire [case template], and several times we have copied back in another word document, we have been working on this document and when we have finished we have copied to the questionnaire to avoid a lot of time. You can work at home or in another place and you do not have to be connected online to the ePractice portal, you only spend 10 minutes to complete this, you can collect all the information and see if you need more information about anything and so on. I think the first [case] was less complete than the last one that we have published; now we have more experience (Javier, civil servant regional government, Spain).

Both quotes refer to the ability of MS-Word documents to circulate the organisation for "people to provide input" and "check" that what was written was "correct". The second quote also points to the ability of MS-Word documents to be carried to different places other than the work place and be available and accessible continuously or in iterative steps. For ePractice case authors good practice cases do not simply represent their project or their experience. It is rather an accomplishment, a project in itself:

Usually these cases are quite complex, they involve a lot of different organisations and usually it's very hard to capture the whole totality of these complex projects in a one page summary which is then put on the ePractice portal (Marko, NGO, Slovenia).

Whereas Javier had spoken of the "completeness" of a case description that may be reached through experience in writing good practice cases, Marko points to the difficulty of "capturing the whole totality of these complex projects". As a result of this feeling (the need to capture more), case authors upload additional documents as part of the good practice case. This also serves to overcome constraints such as word limits or rigid categories in which certain aspects of a case do not fit. These additional documents lie outside the scope of the measurable and quantifiable criteria the template aims to establish, and hence escape the representation of the commensurate practices.

Determining "good practice" through community rating and expert evaluation. Starting with 300 good practice cases that were inherited from the eGovernment Good Practice Framework, ePractice's "knowledge base" comprised over 1,600 by the end of 2012 and, hence, "constantly" increased the "knowledge base of good practice". Initially only browsing by topic and country were possible. By the end of 2012 the search functionality allowed to "browse by tags", by country, domain, sector, status, type of initiative and "regular case awards".

Additionally, a map with cases per country was offered. But despite sophisticated search and browsing functionality there was a demand for rating and comparing the cases in order to make the "better ones" more visible and prominent:

> One thing is the cases […] You start thinking which are the top ones, less good ones, the reference ones. Whatever has to say this classification, but provide me with a clue that a newcomer is able to identify them very quickly (Jorge, ePractice project manager).

One mechanism for evaluating "ePractice good practice cases" were the biannual eGovernment Awards which were launched in 2001 at the first European Ministerial eGovernment conference with the introduction of a "good practice label". Practitioners throughout Europe were encouraged to submit their "cases": first in an open text form, later following the template structure provided by ePractice (and its predecessor eGGPF). A jury of eGovernment experts evaluated the submitted cases. For example, in 2009 a total of 259 submissions from 31 countries were received. The evaluation committee selected 52 finalists from 17 countries to present their projects at the Ministerial eGovernment conference. The final decision by the evaluation committee was taken at the conference itself, where the judges had a chance to visit the project stands in an exhibition hall and ask remaining clarification questions. This procedure resembles the idea of study tours promoted by the European Commission study cited earlier. The evaluation committee then agreed on the winners for four pre-defined categories: eGovernment supporting the single market; eGovernment empowering citizens; eGovernment Empowering Businesses and eGovernment enabling administrative efficiency and effectiveness. The criteria for rating changed over the years as shown in Table I.

Already in 2007 the criteria for "good practice" in eGovernment were re-defined at the European eGovernment Awards: "ePractice good practice cases" needed to be transferable to different contexts:

> Within the criteria it is 20%, out of five, the second one is "potential for sharing good practice". And there is another about 10% about overall impression, "communication capacity". – So you could argue that 25-30% are really about making sure that the case is not only good in itself, but also is accessible to others and can also be helping others in understanding what should be done and what can be done […] It wasn't so specific two years ago. There was a criterion on being accessible and the potential to communicate well (Peter, member of eGovernment Awards committee).

eGov Awards 2003	eGov Awards 2005	eGov Awards 2007	eGov Awards 2009
Use of ICT	Innovativeness and effective management	Evidence of impact	Relevance
Innovativeness	Real practical results and impact	Potential for sharing good practice	Impact
Managing eGovernment implementation	Relevance and transferability	Understanding of multi-channel aspects	Innovation
Real practical results and impact		Innovation and management efficiency	Potential for sharing good practice
Functionality		Communication capacity	Management approach
Visibility			Communication and dissemination approach
Valuable learning points and transferability			

Note: Held on 20 November 2009
Source: Adapted from slide from presentation of Christine Leitner at eGovernment awards ceremony

Table I.
Evaluation
criteria for the
eGovernment awards

In a new framework contract 2009 the European eGovernment Awards and the ePractice portal were merged, arguing that through the eGovernment Awards "European good practice cases" were collected and that they were of interest to "the whole community":

> I think it makes all sense to run the Awards through the portal because in the end of the day what we are collecting through the Awards is good practices from all over Europe that are competing between themselves and they are therefore interesting for a whole community. Including them in ePractice makes them more visible (Luis, ePractice project officer, European Commission DG INFSO).

"Good practice" needed to become "visible" to the community. Hence an argument was made for the "whole community" benefitting from "ePractice good practice cases". The very same objects around which the community was meant to be established when ePractice started in June 2007. Subsequently the focus of the evaluation criteria shifted over the years and in the 2009 Awards it was on cross-border services and community development. There was an emphasis on:

> […] a European focus. And of course sharing: not only the potential but also the evidence of sharing, the collaboration that is so important for further continuous European integration process and that is also quite obvious also in the development of the categories as we have seen (Christine Leitner at the eGovernment Awards Ceremony, November 2009).

Again the notion of application and transfer is promoted in this statement. Leitner talks about "the evidence of sharing" which was at the heart of the ePractice team's striving to identify success stories; evidence of successful knowledge sharing and transfer. Hence over the years the emphasis on "sharing" and transferability grew in the Awards criteria. As Christine Leitner noted, "the evidence of sharing" was very important for recognising good practice.

This turn towards the "whole community" to "relevance" and "sharing" led to an additional evaluation mechanism which was introduced in 2007 for the first time: the public prize. The public prize became an additional category in the eGovernment Awards and was based on the idea that ePractice members formed a "community of experts". Following ideas such as the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki, 2005) the public prize was determined by the votes of ePractice members.

The public prize was promoted as an "open and transparent exchange of opinion". It attracted a lot of votes on ePractice, and promoted the idea of community-based evaluation and "best practice" recognition. More than 1,500 registered users gave their vote; many more than had rated any of the cases for the previous year. At the beginning of November 2009 the number of registered users had risen above 21,000; by the end of the month (perhaps through the traffic produced by the eGovernment Awards) more than 27,000 people were registered. This was twice as many registered users as the year before when portal activity was rather low. As "another European element" the voting procedure had been altered since the previous awards: instead of being able to vote for one's own country, a vote had to be given to another European country, thereby circumventing the support of projects exclusively by voters of the same nationality (as happened to a significant number of cases in the previous awards).

At the eGovernment Awards ceremony 2009 the last prize to be announced was the public prize. As before the winners received congratulations from high-level officials, only, this time, the Swedish Minister for Local Government and Financial Markets, Mats Odell said: "Congratulations from the people" and everybody smiled. The Turkish case SMS Information System won the public prize. This project was a subscription service offered by the Turkish administration to lawyers and citizens to receive SMS messages containing legal information on ongoing cases, dates of court hearings, etc. The SMS message did not replace official notification via post, but provided instant information to all subscribed parties (from the exhibition catalogue www.epractice.eu/files/download/mediakit/exhcat2009.pdf).

Whether "the people" agreed about the relevance and innovation potential of this project for a wider audience will be discussed in the following.

The public vote and the public opinion. The introduction of the public vote as well as ePractice's embracing of the Web 2.0 paradigm led to tensions which I want to elaborate now: the expert vs the community approach. Commensuration and valuation practices are accomplished through differing material-discursive practice of engaging with the case studies, criteria and motivation. The following vignette presents two examples from my fieldwork about how these two evaluation schemes attempt to rank "good practice cases" and – in doing so – identify "best practice": first, an excerpt of an interview with an eGovernment expert who was a member of the eGovernment awards consortium and, second, my field notes from a discussion that took place during a workshop. Both scenes refer to the eGovernment Awards 2009 and reflect upon the fifth winning category: the public prize.

The interview

> [O]ne thing we say in information society stuff, or Web 2.0 stuff is that, you know, experts have their place, it's all very well, but the crowd has more expertise than the experts. If you can tap into that expertise in a proper way, and having a public vote is an attempt to do that. As we saw in 2009, a project from Turkey won, and I thought that was fantastic. They'd probably never have a chance going through the expert procedure.

> Question: Why is that?

> Well, no, because they still were relative immature as a country, they, they may not be good practice in relation to best technical and other things in relation to the leading countries because they're so far behind. […] Normally we measure everybody at the same level, which means that the strong countries do best, and the countries that have been doing it longest do best, but what, perhaps what we should be doing in benchmarking is benchmarking in relation to where they started and what their problems are, and what their contextual conditions are. That's much more difficult and more complicated and of course you get to the stage where the cost of doing that outweighs any benefits. But having a public vote, and people doing it voluntarily and looking around and seeing and actually trying to recognise people who've done extremely well under difficult circumstances, like the Turks have done, is actually good, I think, you know. It's a different way of measurement, but it's just as, it's a form of measurement which is just as valid in my view. It takes into account context, it takes, it recognises effort, as opposed to just cold objective achievement, if you see what I mean (Peter, member of eGovernment Awards jury).

Peter forefronts the situatedness of practices and a general problem with valuation – that everything is meant to be evaluated by the "same standards", the following discussion amongst ePractice members at a workshop challenges this view.

The workshop discussion

During a presentation at a workshop concerned with eGovernment measurements and benchmarking in Ghent, November 2009 a discussion started about the recent eGovernment Awards and that several projects had given impact measurement approaches on their projects as part of their submitted good practice cases. The discussion turned to the reflection that there were so many cases in the ePractice portal and it was questionable whether they were all, in fact, good and who was to say they were. The eGovernment Awards' different categories were mentioned and several discussants expressed their doubts about the "public vote" category, qualifying it as "intransparent, because we do not know why they liked it". Somebody named the winning case: SMS INFO from Turkey. A member of the eGovernment Awards jury who was also present in the room suggested that if workshop participants wanted to look for "good" cases not to consider the public vote

because it was "just" consensus and was not based on "technical or scientific reasoning". In the other four categories, on the other hand, it was possible to find interesting cases, some of which were "really precise about the methodology" they were using and following. He further criticised the qualitative nature of most cases, which gave no measurable results, and commented that if you cannot measure a phenomenon it was "pointless". Agreement reigned after the discussion that the public vote was to be disregarded when looking for "real" good practice cases.

The discussion that I witnessed at the workshop is the representative of how the public prize is perceived by eGovernment practitioners. One of the eGovernment Awards' finalists that I interviewed stated specifically that she was not interested in winning the public prize:

I think it's very weak […] to be awarded because the mostly voted instead of being voted because it's decided from a jury, a selection jury. It's a huge difference (Maria, eGovernment Awards finalist).

Similar to Maria's statement that considered the public prize "very weak", a survey of participants conducted for the eGovernment Awards report 2009 concludes that the "expert process was considered as the most appropriate methodology to determine finalists and winners" (p. 49) and that "the Public Prize category was not taken as seriously as the other categories as it was not decided through expert evaluation" (p. 45).

Expert evaluation and the production of "best practice". Although the expert-evaluation procedure was taken more "seriously" and regarded as valid, the expert committee members themselves raised doubts about the accurateness. In particular, one case invited reflective voices: the winner of the third category "eGovernment Enabling Administrative Efficiency and Effectiveness". The winning case from Portugal provided "easy and convenient access" to hunting licenses via the Multibanco ATM network which were accessible across the country. Hunters could purchase their licenses via these ATMs 24/7 in a "fast and user-friendly interface and a simplified, up-to-date and secure service (from the exhibition catalogue www.epractice.eu/files/download/mediakit/exhcat2009.pdf)".

When talking with Ryszard (Poland, academic), a member of eGovernment Awards jury, about the acceptance of the public prize he stated that in return prizes awarded by the jury would have not been so "appealing" to the public:

You know, using ATM machines to receive licenses for hunting in Portugal, perhaps this could not be the most appealing case for instance for the public side.

Question: And why do you think is that?

Well […] the deeper message is that you use any […] electronic channel available […] to deliver public services and increase accessibility to them, yes, so you are not completely on the Internet or computer networks, […] and the ATM network is a very good case in point, but I mean the whole domain of this public service – hunting – […] could put some people away, to just not look at the case more deeply (Ryszard, member of eGovernment Awards jury 2009, academic, Poland).

I discussed this further with Mark (UK, Civil Servant Central Government), also a member of the eGovernment Awards jury. Mark points to the difficulty in judging what good practice really is:

Question: How much do you think you take the context or the specificities of the countries into account when judging a good practice case?

I think you do; with the qualification that the case does have to have some wider relevance for it to be a good practice case. So there has to be something about it which will be relevant to other countries or other regions. So somebody can learn something from it. But you do in understanding the merits of the case and its impact; you do have to take some local specifics into account. […] The winner in the category that I was in the consensus meeting for was one to do with licensing hunters in Portugal, and the solution was brilliant and inspirational and the story was excellent, because it

was an absolutely brilliant case of delivering a service in the way that best suited the service user, the customer. The customer focus on it was absolutely brilliant. And it […] ticked all the boxes really. But there was some controversy over it because it was about hunting, […] the discussion really had to reassert that […] in rural parts of Portugal, commercial hunting is a primary economic activity, and the regulation of it is a key role for the government. Therefore, this project is in its contextual setting in that country in that region, very, very important. It is not a minor irrelevancy; it's actually very high impact. Therefore, it needs to be credited as such. […] You may not like hunting, that's nothing to do with it [laughs].

[…] But equally if the project had been about hunters in Portugal but clearly had no relevance whatsoever to anybody outside a rural region of Portugal the case wouldn't have been successful, because it wasn't going to tell anybody anything. However, everything, virtually everything about the project was extremely relevant to eGovernment everywhere, […] so it was a cracking case. […] It could've been licensing anything. The fact that it was hunters is almost irrelevant; it was a licensing process that had been designed brilliantly for the circumstances. So, you know, I think that, you know, it came out virtually top in the consensus meeting, all the way through, once you got through some of the emotional reaction. It just walked [laughs] (Mark, member of eGovernment Awards jury 2009, civil servant central government, UK).

The interview excerpt with Mark features a variety of themes discussed throughout this paper: the requirement for a good practice case to travel ("delivering a service in the way that best suited the service user"; "it could've been licensing anything"), yet at the same time taking the locality into account (the fact that "commercial hunting is a primary economic activity" and therefore relevant and important "in its contextual setting"). As Brian (UK local government) pointed out, "best practice" is related to the transfer into one's own work context: "It is not like you go into a shop and purchase something, you've got to have the right environment in which whatever you purchase lives".

The practitioners I have spoken to emphasised repeatedly the situatedness of "best practice": what may work in one European country, may not work in another because of differences in the ways government is organised or the size of countries and government authorities. Brian, in the above quote, points out that "good practices" cannot be transferred like a commodity; something only becomes "best practice" if it is "transferable in some way". Hence what is required is not a transfer but rather a translation and re-situation of practices and their associations. What needs to travel in order for a "good practice" to "stay active" are the cuts that make it meaningful and relevant.

Analysis

Enabling commensuration: boundary work and material entanglements

The literature review presented the example of XEROX in which local and situated practices were meant to be collected in and spread via a tip database. Similar to XEROX's photocopy repair technicians, it is difficult for ePractice members to translate their eGovernment projects into ePractice good practice cases. At the outset the idea of "ePractice good practice cases" resembles the notion of a "container" for the experience and knowledge of ePractice members: individuals are encouraged to translate their experience and knowledge into a text with neatly defined categories, separate and disentangled from the local arrangements and configurations in which the projects are performed. In this respect ePractice resembles traditional knowledge management initiatives which view the learner as a passive "container" (McDermott, 1996) for acquired knowledge and organisations as containers of individuals and separately existing knowledge about the world.

The case study has demonstrated that in order to allow for "circulation" (Urry, 2004; Callon and Law, 2004), eGovernment projects and associated practices need to be translated from an activity into a form that is "comparable" and "measurable". The first step to facilitate circulation was the "good practice case template". It aims to order and coordinate

the varying possibilities of accounting for eGovernment practices by imposing a structure and format. It frames what is considered "innovative" and "relevant" from that what is not. In doing so, the template serves as a commensuration mechanism that imposes a set of standard metrics on these disparate practices. These standard metrics and categories serve as containers for particular dimensions of any given project; they produce particular "cuts".

The first section of the case study has touched upon some of the complexity involved in the endeavour to disentangle an individual's (or even organisation's) knowing and doing, and translate it into a well-defined, circulating entity, namely "ePractice good practice case". The notion of "ePractice good practice case" as convenient and easy-to-use container for translating an activity into text has been problematised in the literature review. The intricate relations of individuals to "other persons, things, practices, and institutional arrangements" (Lave, 2011, p. 152) have become apparent through the reports of MS-Word documents circulating in the case authors' organisations in order to "collect all the information" (Javier) and "because different people had to provide input, check that what I was writing was correct" (ePractice comment). For a case author a good practice case is always entangled in the local performance of the described project or initiative. Case authors and contributors perform agential cuts in order to fit the template and make their project "commensurate". These cuts relate to definitions about, e.g. target audience, type of initiative, funding body, or IT infrastructure which may had not been articulated as such before. The uploading of additional documents may represent parts of the associations that went missing by compiling an "ePractice good practice case" according to the template.

In contrast, for the ePractice team a good practice case is never just this one case but is associated with other cases. The local entanglements of any given case have been cut off. In order to accomplish commensurability, the partiality and situatedness of practices need to be backgrounded or "cut off", commensurability enforces cuts that dissociate meaningful associations and produce new associations among previously disparate entities. The template prescribes a certain structure in order to make "good practice cases" commensurate and searchable based on their metadata (tags, categories, domain and users). This dependency makes it difficult to introduce a new structure because it would affect the commensurability of cases and make it impossible to search for or evaluate them in a "coherent way" (Kostas; project manager of the ePractice team). For the ePractice team "good practice cases" are associated with one another in several respects: through the case template, through the search functionality on the ePractice portal and also through the objective to provide a set of comparable case studies ("good practices").

Hence the "good practice cases" are produced through different agential cuts by the involved actors (e.g. ePractice team members or case authors). For example, the reasons for publishing a case (such as gaining recognition, the task given by a superior, etc.) are not part of a "good practice case" in the same way (or at all) for the ePractice team as they are for the case authors. The ePractice team enacts a different association of "good practice case": one that relates "good practice cases" to each other for their comparability and searchability. ePractice case authors in contrast associate "good practice cases" with their local arrangements. Further cuts are being performed when these ePractice cases are read and evaluated by other ePractice community members as they make yet new associations when reading, situating and reflecting a case.

"Best practice" evaluation as boundary making practice

One of the main challenges for online communities is the large content base that they provide to their members and the need for effective filtering mechanisms. Similar to other networks experienced ePractice this "filtering problem" through an increasing number of "good practice cases" on the portal. Jorge (project manager ePractice) had stated that somebody new to the portal needed "a clue" about which cases are good and relevant.

The notion of "best practice" was employed as a ranking mechanism across the "good practice case database" in order to provide such a "clue".

In order to identify "best practice" two evaluation procedures were employed: expert evaluation and community-based evaluation. The case study demonstrated that both evaluation procedures perform different cuts and associations. Whereas the expert procedure operates within a framework of associating the cases to specific, pre-defined and seemingly rigid criteria in a "standardised way", the community evaluation procedure operates in a blurrier mode. The community members read the cases and thereby knit associations to their own work context but also appreciate the project as a complex set of situated practices ("not measuring by the same standard"). Potentially, community members take "context" into account when evaluating and recognise "effort, as opposed to just cold objective achievement" (Peter).

The introduction of the public vote to ePractice was one possible answer to the "filtering problem" by exploiting the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki, 2005). In doing so sharing was not only a criterion in the expert evaluation procedure, but was also framed as an activity facilitated by the ePractice portal. During the workshop discussion the public vote was depreciated, criticisms ranged from "people vote just what they like" to "we don't know why they voted for the case" to "it's only consensus, not based on criteria". The expert-interviewee (Peter) in contrast sees in exactly the same argument a strength: because the public vote is not based on rigid criteria, people can recognise the work performed within its context, it remains "specific and local". The discussion is concerned with quality, a quality that can seemingly only be ensured by experts applying well-defined criteria to the cases submitted. Peter is concerned with context, with the situatedness of the good practice cases and how it might best be taken into account.

Further, it is important to consider which boundaries are being drawn to define what is part of an "ePractice good practice case" and how "best practice" is being determined. In the case of "best practice" this means that whatever practice is identified as "best" and hence foregrounded is necessarily different to the enactments of the local eGovernment projects. For example, in the Portuguese case hunting is backgrounded or as Mark said: "It could've been licensing anything". Cuts determine the ways in which "best practice" is imagined (e.g. "delivering a service in the way that best suited the service user" (Mark)) and are as such dissociating "best practice" from its local enactments. Cuts also determine how evaluation and circulation take place (e.g. as Mark stated: "Once you got through some of the emotional reaction, it just walked").

The expert in my interview stated "having a public vote, and people doing it [regarding contextual conditions] voluntarily and looking around and seeing and actually trying to recognise people who've done extremely well under difficult circumstances, like the Turks have done, is actually good". However, when viewing a project under its "contextual conditions", it remains entangled in this very context, hence it cannot travel through the network as its boundaries remain fuzzy and blurred. It is not translated in standard metrics and cut off. Commensuration artefacts, such as scoring sheets are missing in the community-based evaluation at ePractice: commensuration fails. There are no given, pre-defined criteria except one's own judgment about relevance, interest or "goodness": as a result, people do not trust the community judgment. For example, José (ePractice project officer) had stated that the community-based evaluation was based on "emotion" rather than "a set of criteria".

Hence the clearly drawn boundaries produced by the ePractice template become fuzzy again in community-based evaluation. The disentangled practice becomes entangled once again and cannot travel the network anymore. In contrast applying criteria through the expert evaluation process seems to leave the "good practice case" boundaries intact or rather seems to create new, well-defined boundaries. Projects are sorted according to categories, and within the categories certain criteria are applied. Projects receive a certain

number of points: if reaching the threshold, they are awarded with the "good practice label". This label is regarded as a "quality label" for eGovernment projects, because the process of judging which of the cases to award with them facilitates boundary making, it makes "a huge difference" as Maria pointed out.

Hence what has been demonstrated in the case study is that the framing and maintaining of boundaries is a key to enabling objects to travel a network, and that the community-based evaluation is not able to maintain the boundaries or re-create them when assessing whether something is "best practice" or not. The account that I have given of community-produced "best practice" fails to produce visible accounts of comparable metrics. It fails to accomplish commensuration because if fails as boundary-making practice. Incompatible "best practices" (in the form of the expert and community-based evaluation) meet at the Awards ceremony and are presented jointly on the ePractice website. They confront each other and lead to what Mol (2003, 2010) calls "friction". Yet it is not the differing interpretations and perceptions of practitioners and experts that lead to this friction, but their enactments in practice: the inability of the public vote to perform agential cuts that translate "best practice" into a circulating entity.

Discussion

This paper posed two research questions:

RQ1. How does "best practice" (e)valuation in online communities differ depending on whether they are produced by community members or experts?

RQ2. And what role play these two practices of valuation for online community performance?

This study has shown that ePractice – like many online communities – faces challenges in terms of coordinating between a high number of members and increasing user-generated content (Bobrow and Whalen, 2002; Shirky, 2008; Vaast and Walsham, 2009). What is required are effective coordination mechanisms that go well beyond what the informal coffee break talks, which Orr (1996) reported on, can offer. In my study "best practice" is meant to serve as a coordination device. It is produced through valuation and commensuration practices that demarcate community boundaries (which practices are relevant and belong) and perform new associations (and alignments).

The case study presented two apparatuses of valuation: a community-based valuation and an expert-based valuation. For both valuation apparatuses two steps are important: the translation from activity into text – the enabling of commensuration processes and the ranking or evaluation of the commensurate entities. Importantly these material-discursive practices perform different agential cuts (Barad, 2007) that produce different subjects (such as successful eGovernment practitioners) and objects (such as "best practice"). The case study demonstrated that the extent to which differing valuation apparatuses (expert vs crowd evaluation) translate the published content successfully into "best practice" differs and is contested within the ePractice community. The validity of the community-ranked "best practice" raised concerns as the cuts that are performed are not transparent, because the community-evaluator is not accountable to a standard set of metrics or categories. This is partly because these material-discursive practices reduce complexity differently. Additional complexity is being created through the demand for valid co-existence or complementarity of these different apparatuses of valuation. They do not "add up comfortably" (Mol and Law, 2002) but rather cause tension and friction. As I have argued above the tension between the traditional expert vs the community approach lies within the different cuts to reduce complexity. This is what inhibits their co-existence as two equally valid forms of "best practice" representation.

Lamont (2012) argued that categorisation and legitimation are key aspects of valuation. The expert evaluation procedure engages continuously and repeatedly (over the years) in the refining of valuation categories. Similar to Orlikowski's and Scott's (2014) AA evaluators is the expert valuation apparatus adjusted to "accommodate new conditions and requirements" (p. 883). Table I gave an overview of the changing criteria, which changed the "formula" according to which valuation of "best practice" was deemed appropriate or relevant. The expert evaluation mechanism is able to translate disparate practices into homogeneous units that may be compared. This is being done through categorising: complexity is reduced, uncertainty absorbed (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012). Practices as part of a wider sociomaterial assemblage are evaluated by assigning value to the very associations in and through which they are performed (e.g. the value of hunting for rural Portugal). The associations are then reduced to their "value" in order to reduce complexity (e.g. licensing hunting could be any licensing process). Subsequently commensurate entities (e.g. licensing processes) may be evaluated and ranked.

Hence if practices are shared or circulate within an online community this is not only possible because of "common embedding circumstances" (Brown and Duguid, 2001), but rather through material-discursive practices of dissociation and association, through agential cuts. These cuts demarcate what is important – and foregrounded – and what is backgrounded. For example, what counts as "context" is differentiated differently. Such boundaries are necessary for the creation of meaning (e.g. what is relevant about a case study and what not). In so doing, apparatuses of valuation define particular views and interpretations of the world. They also elicit particular imaginaries about what they take the community to be (about). Within these apparatuses of valuation new "best practice" objects are produced, which in turn produce accounts of community performance. Importantly then are online communities performed through the co-production of such accounts, "best practices" serve as "immutable mobiles" (Latour, 1987) that make "action at a distance" possible.

In this paper it was demonstrated how commensuration processes successfully perform agential cuts in the expert evaluation procedure, and how the commensuration process fails for the community evaluation procedure. The expert evaluation is hence an apparatus that produces, with Barad, "specific material (re)configurings of the world – which come to matter". These objects ("best practices") serve as circulation devices for the online community. Hence in addition to Orlikowski's and Scott's work, this paper also draws attention to the importance of valuation for the performance of online communities and membership; it demonstrates the importance of producing objects for circulation in order to perform sociality in online communities.

Conclusion
(E)valuation studies are becoming increasingly important yet in many studies, technologies only play a marginal role. This paper has demonstrated what a sociomaterial perspective may offer: in online communities, members collaboratively engage in commensuration and evaluation practices in order to identify relevant and meaningful user-generated content and allow for its circulation. In particular, the paper was interested in practices of practice-circulation: eGovernment practices are situated and entangled within the orderings of a specific public administration body, commensuration practices are employed in order to translate these activities into text, into an entity that may circulate. Even though these entities may circulate and are enacted in diverse sets of practices, they are not entirely separate from their local identities. Rather through valuation these objects are meant to be ordered under a single name: best practice. This may lead to friction even after commensuration has been established.

The paper described the translation of local eGovernment practices into "ePractice good practice cases" and their subsequent evaluation through either community- or expert-based

evaluation as "best practice". It was pointed out that what is of interest is not so much that eGovernment practices differ across sites but rather that they are recognisable and replicable as "best practice". In the case study circulation across sites was meant to be accomplished through the "good practice case template" and through evaluating and ranking "best practice". It was observed that different ways of evaluating "best practice" are constituted by different modes of ordering the associations in which practices, community members, case studies and many more entities are entangled; they enact different cuts. Continuous boundary work was necessary because neither the configured practices of writing "ePractice good practice cases" nor its public evaluation was able to create stable "cuts".

A challenge concerned the singularity of what counts as "best practice" and is questioned through the different mechanisms of who is the one to judge "best practice" and how. Whereas the expert evaluation procedure succeeds in configuring "best practice" in relation to well-defined criteria and thereby delineating boundaries accepted by practitioners, the community-based evaluation fails to do so. The imaginary of the independent expert applying rigid, well-defined criteria clashes with the imaginary (or construction) of a public that only votes for what it likes or is most relevant to it (at best) or for what has been best marketed (at worst).

In sum: "best practice" is produced through a process of material-discursive commensuration and evaluation practices. If commensuration successfully establishes associations and boundaries ("cuts") acknowledged by the community members, then evaluation processes (be it expert-based or community-based) may reduce complexity and enable circulation. Both modes of circulation facilitate the stretching and transcending of boundaries that had been highlighted in the literature review. "Best practices" may then travel across sites and serve as a circulation mechanism that connects and performs an online community.

Notes

1. This strand of research is situated within more general concerns about the datafication of social life and the rise of valuation practices associated with data-driven or evidence-based decision making across private and public-sector organisations alike (e.g. Gitelman, 2012; Kitchin, 2014; Borgman, 2015; Breiter and Jarke, 2016).

2. eGovernment (or electronic government) is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) within public-sector organisations in order to provide electronic services to citizens, businesses, and to other public-sector organisations. The objective of eGovernment initiatives can be described as either using ICT to improve service delivery and make it more effective or using ICT in order to make service delivery more efficient (e.g. Ciborra, 2005; Davison *et al.*, 2005).

3. KUDOS was an award scheme linked to different types of activity on ePractice. The more "active" a user is the more KUDOS she/he may accumulate. A detailed account on KUDOS follows below.

4. These entries have been captured by using the Mozilla Firefox add-on ScrapBook which allows saving web pages and organises their collection (available at: https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/scrapbook/, accessed 4 March 2012).

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