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Sub-theme 45: Materiality, Human Agency and Practice

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Considering the practicing of sociomaterial research and its enactments

Introduction

The methodological approach any research project takes cannot be separated from its conceptual and empirical dimension or its research aims. It provides the grounds on which a researcher constructs and produces a field and navigates in it. The methodological approach includes ontological considerations about the world, the researcher and the ways in which they interact or better 'intra-act' (Barad, 2007). It also includes epistemological considerations about what can be known about the world and subsequently how this knowledge may be acquired and conveyed.

Social studies of science and technology (STS) in which sociomaterial research is grounded, have a strong methodological focus. Yet many writings on sociomateriality in organisation studies and information systems only partially consider the performative conditions of their research. This is partly due to the fact that many studies on sociomateriality argue for a co-constitutive entanglement of the relata in sociomaterial assemblages but only partially consider *how* such entanglements occur. Several scholars have attested a need to conceptualise sociomateriality *beyond* the notion of entanglement. For example, Jones (2013) notes a 'particular need for more empirical process studies to provide insight on the referents of the often abstract accounts in the literature' (p.39). Similarly Leonardi (2012) states:

> Most studies up to this point have sufficed to simply show that the social and the material are thoroughly intertwined, scholars are just beginning to consider how such entwinement occurs (p.35).

This paper is a reflective account of a 3-year ethnographic study—which was indeed an 'empirical process study'—that aimed to contribute to these 'often abstract accounts' by investigating the ways in which relata get entangled and co-produced. My study was concerned with a European Commission initiative to further knowledge sharing amongst eGovernment practitioners across Europe. The initiative's objective was to build a 'European eGovernment community of practice' through the use of offline and online devices. In this project 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) was not used as an analytical concept but rather prescriptively as a desirable objective. The central research question of my study

was: How may the organisation (the ordering and coordination) of Web-based communities be understood as a performance of associations?

In Web-based communities a growing entanglement of social objectives (community development) and technological tools (as their means for implementation and facilitation) is noticeable. What was of interest to my study was how people, objects, practices, technologies, imaginaries and things come to be associated; how membership may be conceptualised and subsequently what we may learn about how community is enacted, performed and accomplished as sociomaterial configuration.

Scholars such as Wanda Orlikowski, Susan Scott or Paul Leonardi came to view practice as the space in which 'dynamic sociomaterial configurations [are] performed' (Orlikowski, 2010, p.138); in which relata are constitutively entangled. Orlikowski directs the focus on 'constitutive entanglements' and these may be 'configurations, networks, associations, mangles, assemblages' of humans and technologies and describes these approaches with the label 'entanglement in practice' (ibid). Hence not technology itself is 'sociomaterial' but the practices in which a certain technology is being associated. Similarly Leonardi (2012) argued that 'what is sociomaterial is not the technology, but the 'practice' in which the technology is embedded' (p.35).

Lucy Suchman (2012, p.48) promotes the notion of *configuration* which draws attention to the 'imaginaries' and 'materialities' that technologies *join together*. Configuration is thereby 'at once action and effect; as a mode of ordering things in relation to one another (Law, 1994) and the arrangement of elements in a particular combination that results' (Suchman, 2012, p.49). Sociomateriality and a relational ontology hence point to the *practice of relating* and associating (an action) and the *effect* of being related/configured in which boundaries between relata have been delineated. Relations between humans and artefacts, between the social and the material are not fixed but remain open to continuous reconfiguration. Hence to understand the performance of community is to understand the continuous (re)configurations that constitute and produce it.

Ultimately my study aimed to demonstrate to what extent a sociomaterial approach offers a suitable way for researching these new forms of organising community and work. Taking a sociomaterial stance regards the ongoing material reconfigurations that are intrinsically linked to the performance of community. Looking at the European Commission initiative as a

configuration to become and be set up as a 'community of practice' attends to a particular way of performing associations, of reconfiguring the world.

Doing sociomaterial research: An ontology of becoming

Sociomaterial research in general and my study in particular, is interested in the performances of associations; it is interested in the processes that create, configure and maintain associations. It does look at objects but not at objects as entities that exist out there waiting to be discovered or analysed, but rather at objects as sets of relations that are continuously re-worked. This suggests a qualitative approach that attends to the *practices* and *processes* related to the performance of associations. Accordingly research with a sociomaterial focus can be described as process-oriented and practice-based. In the following I will explain what I mean by this.

There are many interpretations of what practices are and how they may be studied. Here I will follow Annemarie Mol who provided a compelling account of her own practice-based study in *The Body Multiple* (2003). Mol labels her approach as *praxiography*: an ethnography that focuses on practices. In this framework objects are not just brought into being and remain mute things but they are continuously enacted and re-enacted in practice and become multiple thereby. The identity of objects is never stable, but fragile and ever changing. Praxiography sensitises the researcher to such multiplicity and allows its investigation. Hence for a praxiographer attending to practices is crucial if wanting to understand why objects are multiple and investigate how this multiplicity comes into being. Mol (2003) describes this approach as

> […] part of a recent wave of studies that takes a further step away from disembodied contemplation. This means that it no longer follows a gaze that tries to see objects but instead follows objects while they are being enacted in practice. So, the emphasis shifts. Instead of the observer's eyes, the practitioner's hands become the focus point of theorizing (p.151).

In contrast to this process-oriented view of organising and ordering, often research in organisation studies assumes a view on the object of enquiry as something given in the order encountered. Their boundaries are taken to be for granted and stable (Zammuto et al. 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). The objects of enquiry are taken to be composed of things that can be measured. This 'distal view' on organising is aligned with a 'sociology of being' because it

is concerned with 'taken-for-granted states of being' (Cooper & Law, 1995). A 'proximal view' (ibid) in contrast takes these taken-for-granted entities as outcomes of processes; it is interested in the relations between different entities and the processes that enact and re-enact them.

> Instead of the distal view of organization as locatable structure, proximal organizing involves mobile and non-locatable associations; and, as we've said, such organizing is always partial and precarious. Distally, the boundary is an effect; proximally, it's a happening, a process (Cooper & Law, 1995, p.243).

Hence, a proximal approach suggests that the researcher considers the performative work of ordering rather than order; by looking at relations and recognising these relations as processes rather than durable entities. Proximal thinking is linked to a 'sociology of becoming', a sociology that is interested in the processes, practices and performances that lead to states-of-being. A proximal view on organising is concerned with the processes that create, change or try to maintain 'orders of relations' (Cooper & Law, 1995). These relations are materially diverse and continuously reconfigured. Hence rather than being interested in measurable results and outcomes, proximal thinking is interested in processes and doings that lead to these results.

Proximal thinking is grounded in a process-ontology and complements Mol's praxiographic approach:

> When objects are taken to be at the center of a variety of perspectives, the object world tends to be handled as if it were an assemblage of entities that hang together. That cohere. But if we engage in praxiographic studies of the way reality is enacted, this transitive image of the relations between objects loses its appeal. Objects-in-practice have complex relations (Mol, 2003, p.149).

A praxiographic approach reveals the ways in which 'reality is enacted'; how associations are performed and continuously (re)configured. It has been argued that objects are enacted differently across social worlds or settings. This, however, is not surprising if objects are taken to be 'radically situated' (Suchman, 2005) or to have 'local identities' (Mol, 2003). What is surprising is that objects are held together; that people still recognise the *same* object (e.g. within and across communities of practice). This holding together 'requires enormous efforts of coordination, through an array of other objects and practices, or perhaps better, in

relation to those things' (Mol & Law, 2002, p.10). Objects are effects of relations (Law, 2002). In the following I would like to reflect on how these considerations played out in my research. Before I do this, I will introduce the initiative that I researched.

ePractice

The research activities that I reflect upon in this paper relate to the European Commission initiative ePractice that aimed to 'network' European eGovernment[1] practitioners. Building an ePractice network is part of the bigger aim of building a European Community, of *making* Europe (Jarke 2015). It was situated in an environment that strives to create, nurture and foster a European Union and European Community. 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. Practitioners work either as civil servants at different governmental levels throughout Europe (some involved in IT project management, others in programme management or at policy making level); academics or consultants all engaged across a whole range of eGovernment topics or practices (such as eProcurement, eGovernment benchmarking, eParticipation).

In building and fostering a 'European eGovernment community, the aim of ePractice was to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience amongst eGovernment practitioners across Europe. This was meant to be achieved through a Web portal comprising a number of online and offline measures. 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. Via ePractice users 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 the opportunity existed to participate in eGovernment related workshops and conferences. These workshops provide a more formal

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[1] 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.

place for coming together in form of working sessions, but also leave considerable room for more informal coffee break interaction.

My involvement with ePractice spanned over a period of 3 years; this included a 1 year in-depth study of the Thematic Network eGovMeasureNet[2] which was related to eGovernment benchmarking and measurements. I conducted a total of 73 semi-structured interviews with 58 interviewees. Regarding the selection of interviewees I followed two different strategies.

1) For the ePractice team which consisted of the project officers from the European Commission and a consortium of managing 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. I furthermore interviewed particularly active users of the ePractice Web portal.

In addition I attended 23 events out of which 15 were ePractice workshops and five were events conducted by eGovMeasureNet. My involvement was not restricted to workshops and conferences only but also stretched to the online presence of ePractice. The roles I performed during the research ranged from participant observer to workshop rapporteur to member of an Informal Expert Committee to community presenter to project staff of eGovMeasureNet and community facilitator for eGovMeasureNet on ePractice.

Considering the performative conditions of sociomaterial research

Letting the actors do the cutting

To give an account, to write or tell the story of ePractice is challenging for there is no single story to be told. As with other stories, giving a (historic) account or providing context is in itself a process of ordering. John Law (1994) pointed out that the stories and histories that circulate in a place 'tell us much more about current ordering than they do about the past' (p.52-3). For example the retrospective accounts on one of the ePractice predecessor project's eGovernment Good Practice Framework allowed drawing a richer picture/thicker description of subsequent ePractice orderings. Between the start of my fieldwork in May 2007 and its end in December 2010 the ePractice team members changed several times. At the end nobody

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[2] 'Thematic Networks' were a funding scheme under the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme (CIP) of the European Commission. The name of the Thematic Network has been disguised, and so have been the names of my interviewees.

from the initial team was still working on or with ePractice. Each of the new members of staff had their own ways of accounting for the history and development of ePractice. For example Luis, the 2nd ePractice project coordinator described his task to manage and coordinate ePractice in the following way:

> [ePractice is] a huge octopus with 1000 tentacles, there are many, many actors involved. There is IDABC [...] they have their sub-contractors that are feeding the portal with news. We are contracting eLearningEurope, so this is a very complex thing. And now […] when Knut left […] there were also many other units involved in the Commission, because ePractice had become very popular. It began very small and it grew and grew…

> Luis, ePractice project officer (01/2008-12/2009),
> European Commission, November 2008.

Not surprisingly each new European Commission project officer had their own way of ordering the past in order to tell a story about the present and future development. Hence in ePractice I encountered different stories as well. As Law (1994) reported from his fieldwork in a laboratory that there were oral and written histories and accounts circulating the organisation; and whereas the oral ones tend to be of a more heroic nature, the written ones are rather evolutionary. There are at least four complementary accounts that I encountered during my fieldwork: They turn from more evolutionary, policy-document-based accounts to rather heroic, oral accounts of the actors involved:

1) A first ordering is concerned with how the European Commission understood its role in the development of national eGovernment initiatives as a facilitator in the form of cross-country benchmarking and sharing, and the role of ePractice in this task.
2) A second ordering is concerned with a 'paradigm shift' that took place in how such supporting initiatives should be organised and approached best. It led from a database, object-centred approach to the ideal of an eGovernment community Web portal centred around individual practitioners. This ordering was mostly linked to approaches that seek to realise 'cultivated' communities of practice.
3) A third ordering tells the story of the entrepreneurial character of the ePractice initiators in their efforts to overcome bureaucratic thinking and organisational hurdles by following state-of-the-art technology development. These accounts were given after the ePractice project was initiated, hence in retrospect.
4) A fourth ordering is concerned with how ePractice contributed to efforts of 'making Europe' and thereby supported an almost ubiquitous 'imperative to connect'.

In the following I will discuss the four different orderings that I encountered in ePractice. Subsequently I will reflect upon how such an analysis may enrich and further the practicing of sociomaterial research.

First ordering: Contributing to the Information Society
At the time of my fieldwork (2007-2010) the European Commission had put in place several initiatives to support and further the development of eGovernment in Europe. Its eGovernment Action Plan (cf. European Commission 2006) comprised five major objectives in order to contribute to the i2010 initiative for jobs and growth in the Information Society (cf. European Commission 2005a) and ultimately to the Lisbon Strategy which set out to make 'Europe, by 2010, the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (European Commission 2000). The central idea was to renew Europe's economic basis by 'focussing on knowledge and innovation' (Rodrigues 2005). In a mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy in 2004 an expert group found several flaws. Amongst others: blurred strategic objectives and a lack of implementation, coordination and participation mechanism (Rodrigues 2005). The objectives were then revised and 'major political priorities' selected. Amongst these: 'To facilitate all forms of innovation', and 'to facilitate the spread and effective use of ICT and build a fully inclusive information society' (European Commission 2005b). Further to setting out a number of objectives the European Commission acknowledged that most challenges to their fulfilment were to be found at national or sub-national level, and identified its own role in supporting member states with two types of activities: *measuring* and *sharing*. What was aspired was the 'integration and sharing of processes and knowledge across departments and institutions' (European Commission 2003: p.19). This story presents ePractice as an instance of how the European Commission assumes its role in facilitating the measuring and sharing of eGovernment practices and projects across Europe.

Second ordering: A 'paradigm shift' in sharing practices within Europe
In the interviews with Knut and Victor (European Commission) as well as Jorge (eLearningEurope) a 'shift of paradigm' was emphasised. This shift in the approach of how to facilitate knowledge sharing was experienced as profound and was believed to ensure the success of the newly launched portal.

What was meant by 'paradigm shift' was that, rather than establishing knowledge sharing around 'ePractice good practice cases' as one of its predecessors the eGovernment Good

Practice Framework (eGGPF) did, knowledge sharing in ePractice was based around individual practitioners. This had consequences for the design of the ePractice portal which was more like an Internet community portal than an online case database as the eGGPF used to be. In contrast to the previous portal, ePractice was meant to allow multi-authorship for good practice cases, as it was no longer the case that was unique, but the perspective of the practitioner or the story she had to tell about her eGovernment project. Knut also believed that the shift was expressed in the diffusion of offline and online parts of the portal.

The narrative of the 'paradigm shift' was grounded in a number of considerations: (1) It was felt that there was a community 'out there' related to eGovernment; (2) social networking technology and the Web 2.0 approach became increasingly important and available; and (3) it was felt that this offered a way of engaging with the community in a structured and appealing way.

Overall the 'paradigm shift' featured prominently Web 2.0 concepts such as the focus around individual participants but also the appealing character to its users. It also highlights a discourse about community and community building, and notions of community as an 'unmitigated Good Thing' (Lee & Newby 1983: p.57), as something that evokes close bonds and warm relationships, are apparent. The way ePractice is being talked about and set up, mirrors the striving of contemporary ways of *employing* the 'community of practice' concept within management initiatives. Community is something desirable, something to be found, to be built or to be cultivated (Wenger et al. 2002). The 'community of practice' concept, as employed within the ePractice discourse is a prescriptive term or desirable objective along which the initiative's design is oriented. This stands in stark contrast to the somehow traditional knowledge management approach that was promoted through the 'good practice database'.

Third ordering: Visionaries
Deuten and Rip (2000) argued that 'in retrospect, linearized success stories are told' (p.69). The story that was told about the initiatiosn of ePractice became a story about two men being visionary and driving public sector innovation. Whereas the interviews and conversations around the time of ePractice's instigation in summer 2007 centred around the 'paradigm shift', the retrospective accounts often centred around Knut's and Victor's foresight to implement Web 2.0 ideas within a public sector project.

The accounts recollected that Knut's task was to migrate the eGovernment Good Practice Framework to a new platform. In an interview in June 2007 he reported that the European Commission had been criticised for conducting too many different eGovernment activities in various forms and across different work units. What he promoted in the following was not a mere migration but a completely new approach to knowledge sharing in the public sector: Web 2.0.

> We were not very original in the approach. This is the way the Internet is going. Private sector initiatives have been doing it for a while, and governmental organisations are taking this idea now as well. So we are trying to follow that trend and explore something along the way.

> Knut, ePractice project officer (04/2007-12/2007)
> European Commission, August 2007.

Yet almost two years later he stressed that what was accomplished with ePractice was 'something more' than a 'typical' European Commission project. He described such projects as 'very passive' ('you spend some money and you get a website') and referred to the Good Practice Framework as a 'dying project'. Similarly to the first ordering Knut stressed that 'some people [in the Commission] had believed in the importance of sharing and the fact that you could leverage a lot of resources just by sharing resources'. Subsequently Knut described his situation as an 'opportunity' to expand existing efforts and

> […] make use of some new areas of technology that had become available, but also to expand the notion of what sharing was and expand the scope a little bit to get it bigger […] because I was very aware of the need for critical mass. So I tried to pitch a bigger project which wasn't easy. They […]—all my superiors in the Commission—said it can't be done. Don't do it. We don't wanna do it. It's never gonna work. Just give it up. And certainly you don't have enough experience to do it. So that was interesting. And I just kept on pushing for it, and in the end, I got a lot of support from everywhere in the organisation and we were able to put something together.

> Knut, ePractice project officer (04/2007-12/2007)
> European Commission, March 2009.

Knut described the struggles he encountered within the Commission as a bureaucratic organisation. He stressed that 'this project wasn't easy off the ground' because 'it wasn't something that people really believed in':

> In 2009 it is very easy to walk around and talk about sharing. You know YouTube and Twitter and all […] These words weren't even invented. This was before Twitter had started up, it had barely begun. Facebook was not where it is today. Things go very fast. So this was interaction before the take-off of Web 2.0 sites, certainly in government.

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Knut, ePractice project officer (04/2007-12/2007)

European Commission, March 2009.

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Knut described himself as 'working against the current' and recognising the potential of Web 2.0 technologies for the public sector. Jorge, the project manager from eLearning Europe, emphasised Knut's expertise of the new dynamics of a Web 2.0 approach, as Knut was the author of a memorandum that explained in detail how the consultancy was expected to implement the new project.

> Knut understands a lot because he likes the idea very much. But the others—they are dinosaurs. They are still in the old paradigm of the Good Practice Exchange.

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Jorge, project manager, eLearningEurope, July 2007.

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Yet Jorge, himself a Web2.0 entrepreneur, foresaw 'difficulties ahead' when these others 'discovered' the consequences as they jumped 'very quickly to change a paradigm without understanding its implications'. And 'if Knut lets us run, we have to run as quick as possible'.

In addition to migrating the eGovernment Good Practice Framework to a new platform, Knut also wanted to merge the new initiative with existing ones in other Directorates General of the European Commission. His main collaborator became Victor: Knut described his collaboration with Victor as unusual as they worked in different Directorates General. These different DGs were also physically separated with DG DIGIT being located in the centre of the European Quarter and DG INFSO being situated further away in Beaulieu; a distance that meant about 20-30 minutes of travelling across Brussels if wanting to meet in person. A further challenge was to 'merge the budget lines and actually do a joint project', to agree on 'how to split the work'. 'Everybody said it can't be done, somebody has to be in charge anyway' (Knut, March 2009). In the end it was DG INFSO, Knut's DG, which was in charge. Although Victor had secured more money for the project, he put it in Knut's hands ('He

trusted us and he put great trust in me. Essentially I could have walked away with his money. I didn't [laughs]'. Knut, March 2009). This was also taken up by Luis, Knut's successor, (in an interview in November 2008) as one of the main challenges of the ePractice project: to cooperate across DGs. Another obstacle was the immense resources it took to 'make ePractice happen'. Knut stressed that

> […] it is easy to underestimate it when you see it today what it takes. I mean nobody has done that before. Nobody has created something meaningful for public sector use across borders run by the public sector. I mean it is easy enough to have a NGO start something that is lucky enough to catch the wind. But when you are in the public sector to get the kind of enthusiasm that you need for a project like this to take off is nearly impossible.

> > Knut, ePractice project officer (04/2007-12/2007)
> > European Commission, March 2009.

Yet the ePractice instigators successfully convinced the European Commission and individuals across Europe to become enrolled in the project. Money was secured for several years, and a critical mass of registered users and ePractice good practice cases was soon achieved. Knut and Victor became visionaries of Web 2.0 technologies in public sector use. Luis emphasised:

> They took—I mean Knut and Victor—a risk when they started because at that time Web 2.0 was just a trend. It was not a reality as it is now and everybody uses it. So it was a risk that they took, it could have been a failure because it could have happened that with time people just use Web 2.0 in things like Facebook to exchange photos of his nephew or just to be in contact with friends. I mean, a topic like eGovernment that is—I wouldn't say that is a sexy topic—it's not because it's not interesting but because it's very specialised and very technical. So putting Web 2.0 technology on the service of this topic, I think it was really, really risky. And it turned out to be a success because now—first Web 2.0 is a reality that everyone uses, and second ePractice became a leader and an example for many, many, many other portals run by many other organisations of what a good practice exchange portal using Web 2.0 technology should be.

Luis, ePractice project officer (01/08-12/09),

European Commission, November 2008.

Subsequently ePractice has engaged in 'partnerships' with other governmental bodies 'who have similar goals to exchange people, content, and ideas'.[3] Among these partners are The World Bank and the OECD.

As much as ePractice may be framed as a European Commission project to facilitate sharing and measuring across Europe, or as a project that follows other management initiatives with respect to the ways it sets itself up as a community initiative, it is also possible to frame it as the somewhat heroic story of two EC-officials to overcome bureaucratic thinking and innovate public sector initiatives. Law (1994) had reported on different modes of ordering the laboratory in which he did his fieldwork and stated that 'people are written into them in varying degrees' (p.74); their 'vision' which 'tells of charisma and grace, of single-minded necessity, of genius and of transcendence' (p.79). The heroes in my third story, Knut and Victor, have crafted something remarkable, something that was never done before within the public sector: a good practice exchange portal for the public sector using Web 2.0 technology on a scale not accomplished before. This third ordering is a story about the praise that they received and granted themselves retrospectively for their vision and accomplishment.

Fourth ordering: 'Making' Europe

A fourth ordering employs narratives of the European Union or European Community as a "Network Society" (Castells 2006; Jarke 2015). For example Barry argued that within Europe technology connects across established (country) boundaries, the network that unfolds cuts across borders and can be identified as something European; a *European network* while containing only a limited number of elements it is much more entangled and situated than European countries themselves (cf. Barry 2002: p.153). What Barry describes as the promise of technology and an urge to connect, have Green et al. (2005) called 'the imperative to connect'. They argue that 'new technologies will also be used in political place-making projects' (p.806).

The notion of the *network* provides an image of a European connectedness that facilitates harmonisation. With the rise of social networking technologies became the notion of *community* prominent and offered an imaginary of belonging and identity. The project of

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[3] http://www.epractice.eu/en/partners (retrieved on 04/03/2013).

European harmonisation, of achieving *togetherness* hence relies on these two metaphors. This ordering suggests that Europe is enacted and produced through the performance of initiatives such as ePractice. For example Claire Waterton (2002) discusses how the building of a European biotopes classification database is 'a simultaneous "building" of Europe' (p.178) connected to the 'fantasy of a world united by information' (ibid). Similarly ePractice produces Europe and constitutes it.

What ePractice aimed to achieve was not only the connecting of local 'eGovernment practitioners', but to provide a communal place for knowledge sharing and learning. About one of the objectives Knut had said:

> What we are trying to do here is creating a larger space for them [eGovernment practitioners] to operate, where they feel more at home in the European and cross border context.

> Knut, ePractice project officer (04/2007-12/2007)
> European Commission, August 2007.

Through the sharing of experience and learning from each other, the project of harmonisation across Europe is meant to be supported, and togetherness achieved/accomplished. Yet there are different modes of togetherness emerging and performed.

All of these for orderings frame ePractice in a different way; they associated ePractice activities with multiple and differing entities. For example the third ordering forefronts individual ambition and visionary action whereas the first ordering refers to policy documents and the meetings in which relevant policies are being reviewed.

The different accounts also illustrate the multiplicities and the specificities of ePractice's configuration as a European public sector initiative. One of the key challenges of my research project was to study community as emergent and not as an object. Here Actor-Network Theory provided a helpful framework: Latour (2007) argues that there is never a group, only group formation; accordingly 'groups are constantly being performed' (p. 63). In order to research group formation Latour suggests to follow the actors themselves, to try and

> […] catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish (Latour, 2007, p.11-12).

Hence if we ought to study organising instead of organisations, if we privilege processes over results and outcomes than the boundaries for research need to be drawn differently. One should not limit in advance the shape, size, heterogeneity and combination of associations. To follow the actors also means to let the actors speak and make sense of the world surrounding them. To let them cut the network and establish boundaries. Similarly to Mol's praxiographic account Latour (2007) writes of deploying the 'actors' own world-making abilities' (p.161).[4] He states that 'framing things into some context is what actors constantly do' and argues further:

> It is this very framing activity, this very activity of contextualizing that should be brought into the foreground. [...] To settle scale in advance would be sticking to one measure and one absolute frame of reference only when it is measuring that we are after; when it is travelling from one frame to the next that we want to achieve (Latour, 2007, p.186).

Capturing the performance and enactment of ePractice in terms of different modes of ordering and giving these different modes a voice, allows different actors to make their "own world-making abilities" visible; allows them to articulate how "particular entanglements matter to the production of subjects and objects' (Barad 2007, p.232).

Enacting realities through methods

Importantly, the framing activities reported above do not operate in an interpretive framework. Actors do not only interpret reality differently, but enact different realities. ANT-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) 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. […] The question to now ask is how they mediate and interfere (p.155).

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[4] As soon as we let the actors clean up, so to speak, their own mess, some order can be retrieved which is quite different from the inquirers' own attempts at limiting controversies in advance (Latour, 2007, p.161).

Importantly the choice of methods does not lead to differing *interpretations* of the *same* world, but rather different methods enact different realities. John Law (2004) has called this 'method assemblage'. It describes the practices of knowledge making as 'enactments of relations that make some things (representations, objects, apprehensions) present "in-here," while making others absent "out-there". The "out-there" comes in two forms: as manifest absence (for instance as that which is represented); or, and more problematically, as a hinterland of indefinite necessary, but hidden Otherness" (p.14). Hence

> [w]e are not dealing with different and possibly flawed perspectives on the *same* object. Rather we are dealing with *different objects produced in different method assemblages*. (Law, 2004, p.55, emphasis in original).

Hence taking a sociomaterial stance does not only affect the way we conceptualise what we research but also the way we do research: Methods do not only affect the way we make sense of how and what we encounter but we understand that they also produce our encounters. It is therefore important to ask how a particular method interferes and possibly mediates with the world because not only are the various actors of a study engaged in framing activities and cut their networks but the researcher does so as well.

For example, the researcher's attendance at workshops produces a setting that is observable; the researcher is not a fly on the wall. Likewise interviews invite the interviewees to reflect on and possibly alter their actions, thoughts and beliefs. The researcher herself always cuts and delineates actors, and in doing so inevitably gives voice to some actors and mutes others. These dynamics pose important ethical questions about a researcher's responsibility and accountability to various actors, it points to differing power relations amongst actors that—at times—cannot speak for themselves but are spoken about; that are being produced through the research conducted.

In addition the challenge for any proximal study is to describe a process. We do not observe a constant stream, but rather cut and frame what we observe in order to make sense of it, in order to derive meaning. Eventually the researcher has to make cuts—during the fieldwork, analysis and writing.[5] Similarly my own account of ePractice and the different orderings produce particular enactments of 'ePractice'. What they achieve, despite their difference is

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[5] For example, Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999) demonstrated that the assembling of actors in a researchers' writing always reflects the researchers own presumptions. In their paper they argued that Law in his 1987 article about the Portuguese expansion forgot one of the most important actors: God.

that they still succeed in enacting ePractice multiples that are recognisable. Despite the different framings my accounts succeed to accomplish this. Mol and Law (2002) have argued that different modes of ordering coexist and reduce complexities differently. This difference in complexity reduction is what makes it so difficult to *compare* these orderings.

> Often it is not so much a matter of living in a single mode of ordering or of 'choosing' between them. Rather it is that we find ourselves at places where these modes join together. Somewhere in the interferences something crucial happens, for although a single simplification *reduces* complexity, at the places where different simplifications meet, complexity is created, emerging where various modes of ordering (styles, logics) come together and add up comfortably or in tension, or both (Mol & Law 2002: p.11, emphasis in original).

This new complexity is being created through the demand for valid co-existence or complementarity of these different accounts of ePractice (modes of ordering). At times such accounts may not 'add up comfortably' but rather cause tension and friction, and too often are we as researchers inclined to brush over such tension in order to present a coherent narrative or story.

Yet, taking Actor-Network Theory as a starting point for methodology considerations invites a specific way of framing the research. For example, an ANT-inherent aspect of its studies and their accounts is a 'tendency to centred managerialism' (Law 2004: p.157). The term association invites us to belief that there is somebody 'doing' the association (Mol 2010: p.264). Yet every actor is always part and constituent of the association they perform. Similarly a researcher does not stand outside an association and observes from an independent point of view what is happening but is always also entangled and part of an association and thereby constitutes and reconfigures it.

Callon's (1986) 'elements of a sociology of translation' tend to promote the idea of a central actor doing the enrolment work and establishing themself as 'obligatory passage point'. This 'tendency to centred managerialism' is also noticeable in my account in which the European Commission assumes a semi-invisible hand in the shaping of ePractice, for example through the demand for accounts of the portal's success. The introduction and reconfiguration of accounts changes the very configuration of the community. The way I have reported in my research on the quest for accounts further emphasises the governmental role the European

Commission assumes within ePractice. It is hence important to consider what particular realities are enacted through the methods we choose.

Methods produce researchers

A methodology does not only prescribe the methods a researcher makes use of but is itself a method to produce a researcher. In the following I will give an account from my field notes of the ePractice Kick-off workshop on 31st May 2007 in Brussels.

I had been kindly invited by Knut, the European Commission project officer who had initiated ePractice. I had registered at the ePractice website, set up a user profile and registered for the workshop. On the website I could download the agenda, the directions and I was able to see the profiles of other workshop participants. It was my first trip to Brussels and I stayed in a Hostel in order to save money.

From my time as a research fellow of a public sector consultancy I knew that people working on IT projects in the public sector have very different ways of dressing: some very casual, some rather business like. I was wondering what the most appropriate outfit would be for a young researcher who wants to make contact with 'the community'. From the few profile pictures of workshop participants that I could see on the ePractice Web portal it was difficult to tell whom I was going to meet. I decided to go for a black suit.

The Hostel was situated in the historic centre. Based on a Google Maps print-out I decided that it was easiest just to walk 20 minutes to the venue which was located in one of the European Commission buildings on Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat. It was a little confusing to find my way around in a city where everything is labelled in French and Dutch, particularly because my print-out was not consistent with the languages and some places/street names were not readable. The historic old city and the European Quarter to its West have a very different atmosphere. Whereas the historic centre is inhabited by old building structure, the European Quarter is marked through multi-storey, glass-fronted office buildings that display the European flag. Whereas tourists are strolling through the old part of the city, people hurry along the sidewalks in the European Quarter.

The workshop took place in one of the high, glass-fronted office buildings. With the little French I knew I told the security guard what I was there for. He checked my German identity card and confirmed that my name was on the list of the ePractice workshop. I had to sign for

my attendance and then got a visitor badge which had a sticky back. This badge needed to be worn visibly at all times, especially when entering or leaving the Commission premises.

The security guard pointed in the direction where the workshop was going to be held. Just around the corner to the left, on the ground floor. To the right, glass security gates blocked the way to the lift and upper levels. As I learned later these gates have to be operated by European Commission officials using the bar codes of their ID employee cards. That day however these gates remained closed for me. I was inside the Commission, but only just.

The workshop room was big and light due to one side being a glass front to the side walk. I could see what was going on outside, but could not be seen myself. There were already a few people gathering around a coffee table and engaged in conversations. I could make out somebody talking in English, but also heard Spanish and French. I thought: ¡Bueno! Here I come to practice *my* 'Europeaness'. Knut, the project officer recognised me, and came over to welcome me. He introduced me to several of the ePractice team members: Victor who works in DG DIGIT, Andrea and Jorge who work for the Spanish consulting company eLearningEurope that was subcontracted to manage ePractice. Knut told me for whom else to look.

The dress code was as diverse as I had anticipated: people in business suits; people in jeans, slippers and T-Shirts. I thought that the variety and ways of dressing exemplified the diversity of job roles of the people coming together. From the participants' list I could see that there were people from local, to regional, to national governments; there were people engaged mainly in technical tasks, others rather on the programme management level; there were consultants, academics; there were young women wearing short skirts and an old British lad wearing a knitted jumper; there were people from all over Europe –a diverse crowd. The ePractice team members: European Commission staff and project consultants all wore business outfits. People seemed to know each other and it didn't seem as if a new community was about to be created.

Producing subjects

The scene described is inhabited by a multitude of heterogeneous entities that frame and produce 'eGovernment practitioners'. The individual participants do not come as ready-made eGovernment practitioners or ready-made ePractice community members to the workshop but instead they are translated *into* eGovernment practitioners. This translation is being done, is

being produced by the material arrangements described above. People made a choice about the clothes they were going to wear for the workshop (be it consciously or not) and thereby (a) displaying something about their organisation of origin, (b) their professional identity and understanding, (c) the expectations of fellow practitioners and what might be appropriate or not. Prior to the workshop participants had to register at the ePractice website *as* eGovernment practitioners entering their names, affiliations, interests. These profiles are configuring the practitioner by encouraging the completion of a keyword interest section that allows for the use of pre-defined tags. Furthermore the individuals travelled to Brussels via train, car or plane; they had arranged for accommodation and they had found their way into the Commission building in *Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat* in order to become part of a 'European workshop community'. They wore visitor badges that demonstrated their externality to the Commission; they also wore ePractice name badges that represented their belonging to the ePractice community. These tags displayed the name and affiliated organisation of each participant. They related, along with the participants list all these individuals as representatives of their organisations, their countries, their professional roles as a community of eGovernment professionals. The eGovernment practitioner was constituted through all of these material arrangements (and many more).

I was performing my role not only as a researcher but a *European* researcher. Walking through the streets of Brussels and finding myself in the busy European Quarter with all those high, glass-walled buildings. While recognizing names in Dutch and French, stumbling some French to the security guard, and then reaching secure ground and being able to talk in English: Trying to overhear a conversation in Spanish between some ePractice team members. Not meeting any Germans, and hence not being able to share a national identity; being unable to follow other participants talking Greek to each other. Wishing to know more languages! This is an experience common to anybody coming to Brussels, this multitude of languages. And the seemingly effortlessness with which European Commission staff switches between them in their conversations.

Overall any account on methodology is not only about legitimation and scientific practices but a disciplined way of cutting (the network) and 'seeing' the world (in the sense Ludwik Fleck used the term). Fleck (1980 [1935]) argued that any community membership, and in particular membership in scientific communities, is an evolving form of expertise, in a community's 'thought style'. He distinguished between looking (schauen) and seeing (sehen). In order to

'see' one needs to know what is important and what not; one needs to know the main characteristics of a given phenomenon.[6] Everything else is being back-grounded (or 'othered' as Law would call it). Once we 'see', we are not able to *not* see a particular phenomenon anymore. Hence we do not only look at the world, but come to see it through the eyes of our 'thought collective'. 'Seeing' (or observing) is a co-constitutive process, as it not only produces that what is observed but also the seeing individual as a 'skilled observer'. This is an ongoing process of observing and confirming the observed (within a 'thought collective'), and every affirmation makes the member see 'it' a bit more.

Further to these, academic writing practices are an important method for producing researchers: Research practices do not only mediate and interfere with the objects of study, the writing process itself is yet another practice that interferes with what has been studied, they *translate* and *transform*. Mol highlights a very important point:

> What is a good way of doing research, of going about the assembling and the handling of material? […] Knowledge is no longer good in as far as it faithfully represents some object as it is. Objects do not slide silently, untouched, from reality into a text. […] The normative question therefore becomes which of these interferences are good ones. And when, where, in which context, and for whom they are good. Good knowledge, then, does not draw its worth from living up to reality. What we should seek, instead, are worthwile ways of living with the real. […] What we are doing when writing academic texts depends not only on how the material is assembled. At least as important are the ways in which it is processed, rendered, mobilized. Written (Mol 2003, p.157).

Similarly the investigative US-journalist, Joan Didion stated that not all discoveries are done during research, but that discovery 'still happens in the writing'[7]. An illustration of how writing practices produce realities is a collage by the artist John Clang[8] that features parts of photographs of the same place at different times. In the collage snippets of different photos are assembled: The collage depicts the same place, yet also features different people hurrying through it at different moments in time. The collage is not so dissimilar to the work a

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[6] Fleck gives the examples of a photograph of which we do not know what it depicts. It may be the skin of a toad or a penicillin culture. It is neither of both, as he continues, but a cirrocumulus cloud which any meteorologist would immediately recognise. Yet where the meteorologist 'sees' a particular type of cloud, any non-meteorologist can only look at a (meaningless) picture.

[7] Interview with Gibson Fay-Leblanc, 15th April 2006 published at http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/seeing_things_straight/ (retrieved on 18/02/2012).

[8] http://www.lomography.com/magazine/lifestyle/2012/02/16/time-a-photo-collage-series-by-john-clang

researcher is doing in so far as that it brings different voices and viewpoints together to describe a certain phenomenon or process. Writing is very much like this collage—that shows the *same* place at different times—as in the different orderings a researcher describes she represents the *assumed same* association in different enactments. In the collage the space/place overlaps in time, in a researcher's accounts reality is shown to multiply as well.

It is hence important to pay attention to the process of becoming a researcher. This process may be described as a particular sociomaterial performance of attending meetings, presenting ideas, writing academic papers, receiving peer feedback. All these activities are very important for the production of the research as well as the accounts (and outputs) it produces.

Concluding thoughts

The considerations above have argued that we enact realities through our knowledge making practices and in so doing constitute and produce ourselves *as* researchers. The work of representing these knowledge making practices (or method assemblages) and their analysis is itself ordering work. Above I have provided an account of three dimensions that shape the performative conditions of our research:

1) Letting the actors do the cutting/agential cuts
2) Enacting realities through methods
3) Producing researchers through methods

What we need to consider are the performative conditions of our research: What did an observation produce? It comes to mind—and the discussion above has shown—that 'observation' (or 'seeing') is in itself a problematic term that distally suggests that we are looking *at* something which is out there. Further, methods not only produce empirical data but also a number of other subject- and object-positionings including informants, a research setting and the researcher themselves. Importantly research accounts are effects of relations; they are a happening themselves.

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