



Commentary

Information Systems Strategy and Strategy-as-Practice:
A joint agenda[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This review applauds the initiative to bring together Information Systems Strategy and Strategy-as-Practice research, as in this Special Issue. It highlights especially promising features of each of the empirical articles and develops an agenda for taking some of the themes further. In particular, the review points to opportunities for the intimate comparative investigation of episodes of Information Systems strategizing, for example by video-ethnography; focus on the under-examined impacts of new or taken-for-granted Information Systems in strategy, for example big data, social media and Excel; and consideration of the political and discursive competence of Information Systems strategists in action, by comparison with other specialists. This agenda would be effectively advanced by joint work on the part of Information Systems and Strategy-as-Practice researchers.

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1. Introduction

To use a strategy term, there is natural synergy between Information Systems Strategy research and the Strategy-as-Practice perspective. After all, Information Systems researchers have been working on issues of strategy for four decades and more (Green, 1970; Chen et al., 2010; Galliers, 2011; Merali et al., 2012). At the same time, the Information Systems field includes some of the pioneers of a Practice perspective within the management disciplines most widely (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 2000; Orlikowski, 2000; Hayes and Walsham, 2001; von Krogh et al., 2012). In the other direction, Strategy-as-Practice has been reaching out for a greater understanding of materiality (Vaara and Whittington, 2012), a domain in which the technologies of Information Systems are particularly relevant. The four empirical papers in this Special Issue are thus an important and promising step towards fulfilling the joint potential of these two streams of research.

The task now, of course, is to go further. My commentary therefore will both highlight some of the most promising ideas from this Special Issue and propose specific topics and methodologies for a joint research agenda. This agenda is framed around the Strategy-as-Practice framework of Praxis, Practices and Practitioners (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), a framework which both Peppard et al. (2014) and Huang et al. (2014) draw on in this Special Issue too. The commentary's essential logic is to take some important existing themes in the Information Systems literature, feed them through the machinery of the Praxis–Practices–Practitioners framework, and then re-present them in their new shapes as opportunities for joint work by Information Systems Strategy and Strategy-as-Practice researchers. While there are plenty of relevant themes, for illustration I shall focus on three, each corresponding to one of the dimensions of the Strategy-as-Practice framework: the roles of Information Systems technologies in strategizing practices; issues of strategizing power and influence for Information Systems practitioners; and the importance of tightly-defined episodes of actual praxis, where

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Table 1

Information Systems and Strategy-as-Practice: a joint agenda.

Information Systems themes	Strategy-as-practice foci	Illustrative research agenda
'The internal life of process' (Brown and Duguid, 2000)	Praxis: episodes of strategizing activity	Episodes of Information Systems strategizing
Technologies-in-use (Orlikowski, 2000)	Practices: sociomaterial technologies in strategizing activity	Excel, social media and big data in strategizing
Influence of Information Systems specialists (Peppard, 2010)	Practitioners: potential for agency in strategizing activity	Relative competence (political and discursive) of Information Systems strategists

technologies-in-use and practitioner-agents come together in the making of organizational strategy. Table 1 provides a summary of these three themes and how they relate both to existing research in the two fields and to a potential joint agenda for future research. The remainder of this commentary will explore the dimensions of praxis, practices and practitioners in turn.

2. Praxis

The Information Systems discipline has already taken from Practice theory a radical re-orientation of research on information technologies, moving away from designed properties to the ways in which they are used in practice. Thus for Orlikowski (2000: 413), the Practice lens 'focuses attention on what people actually do with particular technologies in their ongoing and situated activity'. This Practice focus on what people do obliges close empirical observation of how technologies are really used, sensitive to all the adaptations and improvisations of practical life. Such intimate research engagement implies going deep inside organizations, rather than observing them from outside. As Brown and Duguid's (2000: 94) classic study of *The Social Life of Information* puts it, the Practice approach is concerned with 'the internal life of process'. While many Process approaches are content with an external view of organizational processes, the Practice perspective insists on studying them from within.

For Strategy-as-Practice researchers, the concept of praxis picks up on the same concern for activity, what people actually do in their strategy work (Whittington, 2006). The verb form 'strategizing' reinforces this active conception of strategy (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Just as for Information Systems researchers, the appreciation of activity implies a deepening of traditional Process research methodologies. Thus an early introduction of the Strategy-as-Practice perspective warned that academic interviewers too often resembled Victorian anthropologists, summoning village chieftains to their verandas to provide oral accounts of their local societies (Johnson et al., 2003). Even in such a complex and inaccessible domain as strategy, Strategy-as-Practice researchers now increasingly supplement interviews with direct and intimate ethnographic methods, including video-ethnography (Kwon et al., 2013; Liu and Maitlis, 2014). As Peppard et al. (2014) in the introduction to this Special Issue insist, such intimacy of research engagement must be at the heart of developing 'Information Systems Strategy as Practice' agenda. For Strategy-as-Practice researchers, this kind of depth methodology has been facilitated by adopting a tight empirical focus, often on short 'episodes' of strategizing work (Hendry and Seidl, 2003). Such episodes might be strategy awaydays (Johnson et al., 2010) or management meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). Here the case study is not the whole organization, and the concern is not only with organizational performance, as in many Process studies (Whittington, 2007). Rather, the case is the episode, often minutely examined in series within a single organization or comparatively across different organizations. Performance involves more than organizational outcomes; performance is also about how people 'perform' their roles in praxis.

Information Systems Strategy research is already turning in similar directions. Galliers (2011) for example captures the sense of activity with his use of the verb 'strategizing', rather than the noun strategy. In this Special Issue, Leonard and Higson (2014) pick up on 'strategizing' too, making use of Jarzabkowski's (2005) distinction between procedural and interactive forms of strategizing, for instance. Three of the papers in this Special Issue also make use of close observation, for instance of meetings (Henfridsson and Lind, 2014). Huang et al's (2014) development of the 'site' concept has the potential to achieve an equivalent tight empirical focus to Hendry and Seidl's (2003) more temporal notion of 'episode'. These are promising steps. However, Information Systems Strategy researchers may find in Strategy-as-Practice research further useful methodologies to help them 'zoom-in' (Huang et al., 2014) even closer on the details of Information Systems strategizing praxis. There is particularly rich potential in intimate ethnographies of praxis applied to systematically-defined episodes and tightly-specified sites. Such episodes might be the pitches of Information Systems managers for strategic investments, or the kinds of regular technology implementation reviews described by Leonard and Higson (2014). Exploring the 'internal life of process' through comparative analysis of tightly-defined sites and episodes will allow Information Systems Strategy researchers to reveal still more about the roles of information technology practices and practitioners in actual strategy praxis.

3. Practices

Information Systems research is also sensitive to how social practices 'congeal' in technologies (Wenger, 1998). In this sense, information technologies are inscribed with certain affordances, constraints, norms and expectations that influence

day-to-day use. Even if improvised in praxis, these technology practices tend to produce recognisably if imperfectly regular behaviour. Accordingly, Orlikowski (2000) distinguishes between information technologies as artefacts and 'technologies-in-practice', patterns of recurrent and situated technology use. Information Systems researcher developed the term 'sociomateriality' to affirm the inherent inseparability between the technical and the social (Orlikowski and Scott, 2009). Thus when Information Systems researchers talk about technologies, they are always describing practices as well (Leonardi, 2012). What Information Systems researchers reveal here is that practices are not merely discursive or symbolic, but material and technological.

Strategy-as-Practice researchers are beginning to catch up with the role of materiality and technology in strategizing, adopting the term sociomateriality in particular (Vaara and Whittington, 2012; Friis and Koch, 2014). It is high time. At a basic level, nearly every strategizing project involves the sociomaterial practice of building 'decks' of slides, both to create strategy and to communicate it. Thus Giraudeau (2008) shows how the practice of iteratively developing PowerPoint decks helps in the drafting of strategy, allowing flexibility and experimentation even in an apparently rigid formal planning process. Similarly Kaplan (2011) finds that PowerPoint usage facilitates the participation of many actors in strategy-creation, even if control over the deck remains intensely-contested and clumsy decks can sometimes derail initiatives. Thus many strategizing practices, from strategy formulation through to strategy communication, are inseparable from the Information Systems that support them.

There is a clear opportunity for Information Systems researchers to help as Strategy-as-Practice researchers grapple further with the role of material technologies in strategy. Henfridsson and Lind (2014) make a start here with their notion of 'technology-mediated practices', while Arvidsson et al. (2014) consider the role of Information Technology 'within' practices. These are broad guiding themes, but there are specific topics that could inform a joint research agenda too. In strategizing, the natural complement to PowerPoint of course is the ubiquitous Excel spreadsheet: running the numbers on a spreadsheet is a near-universal strategy practice, with barely examined effects. Big Data too, and the new analytical tools associated with it (Marchand and Peppard, 2013), are likely to have an impact upon strategizing that most Strategy-as-Practice researchers are ill-equipped to approach on their own. There are also new social technologies, such as IBM's jamming technology, that are opening up new opportunities for participation and inclusion in strategizing processes (Haefliger et al., 2011; Stieger et al., 2012; Whittington et al., 2011). There exists therefore an ample joint agenda for Information Systems Strategy and Strategy-as-Practice in exploring still further the various practices that are congealed in the technologies of strategizing. The combination of Information Systems expertise, strategy knowledge and ethnographic skills promises to deliver equivalent insights to those originally revealed in Orlikowski's (2000) studies of information technologies-in-use.

4. Practitioners

Finally, Information Systems Strategy researchers and Strategy-as-Practice share a concern for practitioners, the human-beings who do stuff and, we hope, consume our knowledge. In Practice theory, it is a central assumption that practitioners are agents whose ordinary activity can make a difference. In their praxis, practitioners enact practices in ways that affect outcomes – that is why their activity is worth studying. Naturally, the concern of Information Systems researchers in particular has been the place of IT specialists in organizations, a group that is often marginalized, frequently with damaging repercussions (Peppard and Ward, 1999). Achieving due influence is a daunting task: the effective Chief Information Officer has to be a diplomat, a relationship builder and a strategic thinker, amongst many other things (Peppard, 2010). Enhancing the contribution of Information Systems practitioners to strategy lends itself particularly to a Strategy-as-Practice perspective.

Thus already Strategy-as-Practice researchers are exploring the potential for human agency in the organizational web of practices (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). One strong theme is different groups of actors are excluded or included in strategizing praxis: strategizing is inherently political (Vaara et al., 2010). For Strategy-as-Practice, practitioners' discursive competence is central, both in terms of capacity to access appropriate discourse and skill in using it (Fauré and Rouleau, 2011). For example, exclusion or inclusion in strategizing may be attributable to prevailing discursive practices in organizations: thus an excessive 'technologization' of strategy discourse may serve to solidify the power of some organizational members, while excluding the majority of others (Mantere and Vaara, 2008). On the other hand, strategic influence may be won or lost by discursive dexterity in the moment, as captured in the intimate ethnographic study of top managers in action by Samra-Fredericks (2003). The strategist is revealed not as an interchangeable cipher, but as an individual agent with the potential to manipulate strategy discourse skilfully in their own cause.

The papers in this Special Issue are already sensitive to internal competitions for influence, for example in Henfridsson and Lind's (2014) attention to organizational sub-communities in Information Systems strategizing. In exploring the strategic influence of information practitioners, the particular contribution of a Strategy-as-Practice perspective would be to look not only at indices of formal authority (position in the organizational hierarchy, size of budget and similar), but also at practitioners' skilled interventions in action. In the analogy of one of the original Practice theorists, Bourdieu (1980), the exercise of power in social life is like the playing of cards in a card-game: for the practitioner as agent, it is not just a matter of what cards one holds in a hand, but how skillfully one plays them. Power is also a matter of 'performance'. Thus, from a Strategy-as-Practice perspective, further understanding of what it means to be an Information Systems diplomat, relationship-builder and strategic thinker (Peppard, 2010) would involve close observation of how such practitioners perform in praxis. Exactly

how do effective Chief Information Officers frame strategic issues, pitch strategic projects, form internal alliances, negotiate deals and so on? What are the dominant strategic discourses to which Information Systems practitioners need to relate, and what are the discursive competences they require? For Strategy-as-Practice researchers, considering the strategic contributions of professional specialisms such as Information Systems in comparison with equivalent specialisms (strategic planning, marketing, etc.), would be a natural extension of existing work on strategic discursive competence (Fauré and Rouleau, 2011).

5. Conclusion

This commentary has proposed a joint agenda for Information Systems Strategy and Strategy-as-Practice researchers. This is not a big stretch. The Information Systems field has longstanding interests both in Practice theory and in the strategic role of Information Systems, while Strategy-as-Practice researchers are increasingly recognizing the significance of material technology in strategy work. There are therefore many potential avenues for mutual exchange and collaboration. My focus on the three themes here is to illustrate the possibilities, not to exhaust them.

Drawing on the Strategy-as-Practice framework, I have therefore highlighted specific topical and methodological opportunities in the areas of Praxis, Practices and Practitioners. Starting with praxis, the Information Systems field in general is already sensitive to 'the internal life of process'. Where Strategy-as-Practice researchers have an advantage at this point is in applying this sensitivity to the complex and hard-to-access domain of strategy. They have built substantial empirical experience in applying various intimate methodologies, particularly ethnography, to strategy from the inside. Here they have developed the concept of episode in order to help researchers zoom in on specific slices of strategy work, and to compare them across time or across organizations. Where ethnography threatens to overwhelm with complex detail, episode promises to provide tractable focus. In the sphere of Information Systems strategy praxis, Strategy-as-Practice has methodological contributions to make at least.

Turning to practices, Information Systems Strategy researchers are uniquely well-placed to understand the information technologies that are increasingly influential in strategy work. These technologies include PowerPoint and Excel, project management software, the analytics of Big Data and the new social media. All of these impact other practices at the same time as secreting within themselves distinctive practices (editing, communicating, calculating, controlling, analysing and participating) of their own. Information Systems Strategy researchers will readily grasp the importance of these technologies to strategy. What they can do now is help Strategy-as-Practice researchers reach an equivalent appreciation of the full range of information technologies, especially 'in use'. The study of episodes of technology-mediated strategy practices comparatively across time or across organizations – for example, strategy rationalization by Excel or strategy participation through social media – offers exciting opportunities for collaboration.

With regard to practitioners, both Information Systems Strategy and Strategy-as-Practice researchers share an ambition to 'humanise' their disciplines, the first recognizing an historical absorption with technologies as artefacts, the second reacting against a tradition of economic abstraction. The role of Information Systems practitioners in strategy is a pressing issue, not only for their disciplinary champions, but also, with the increasingly technological nature of strategy work, for Strategy-as-Practice scholars as well. The research opportunity here is at least twofold: on the one hand, to understand Information Systems practitioners in comparative perspective, alongside all the other specialists jostling for position in strategy work; on the other, to take a Practice-theoretic approach, using intimate methodologies capable of appreciating practitioner skills as performed in actual praxis.

My opening claim used the disciplinary cliché of synergy to describe the potential relationship between Information Systems Strategy and Strategy as Practice. As in business reality, it takes hard work to take full advantage of theoretical synergies. However, the papers in this Special Issue have made a very substantial start, and I hope this commentary will encourage both research communities to build on this strong platform. With regard to both topics and methodologies, we can help each other.

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