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Visualizing institutional logics in sociomaterial practices



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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the mutual constitution of competing institutional logics and sociomaterial entanglements by combining a sociomaterial lens with the institutional logics perspective. We present findings from an interpretive, longitudinal case study at the emergency general surgery ward of a Nordic university hospital. By focusing our analysis on how sociomaterial affordances emerge through the implementation, use and continued development of digital and physical visualization boards, we show how these artifacts constitute an integral part of the operational staff's sensemaking and enactment of a new institutional logic. We make two contributions. First, we show how the perceived affordances of a technology are created from the experience of using several different technologies and how the rejection of one technology can simultaneously constitute another. Second, we show how visualization artifacts, entangled in sociomaterial practices, can shape individual focus of attention and thus facilitate the integration of a new institutional logic in operational practice.

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1. Introduction

A recurring question in the information systems (IS) literature is how to conceptualize the relationship between the social and the material in a way that encompasses not only interactions between people and material things, but also the mutually constitutive relationship between the social and the material (Kautz & Jensen, 2013; Leonardi, 2011; Leonardi, 2013; Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Orlikowski, 2007, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Scott & Orlikowski, 2013). The sociomaterial lens has proven useful in explaining

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how organizational routines and technologies become interwoven (Leonardi, 2011) and how the social and the material are entangled in practice (Orlikowski, 2007). However, it has not sufficiently accounted for and linked institutional macro-structures with underlying interpretive processes through which these practices are enacted. Nor has previous research fully explored how sociomaterial practices at the micro-level emerge and develop in complex institutional contexts influenced by multiple and partly conflicting norms, beliefs and guiding rules (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary, & Van Leeuwen, 2013; Mignerat & Rivard, 2009). The perspective of institutional logics, emphasizing how institutional contradictions provide actors with both opportunities and constraints for agency and institutional change (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) has the potential to address this gap in the literature.

In this paper, we present findings from a longitudinal case study of the emergency general surgery ward of a Nordic university hospital. In the case, we observe how the operational staff members at the ward use visualization boards to make sense of and gradually adopt and develop work routines consistent with a new institutional logic. The new logic is manifested in the production philosophy called Lean management practices (Lean practices), in turn part of a larger institutional trend in the service and healthcare industry often described under the rubric of New Public Management (NPM) (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). The Lean philosophy originates from the automotive industry and has recently become a popular method to increase productivity and quality also in the service industry and in healthcare (Radnor, Holweg, & Waring, 2012). A central work method in Lean practices, aimed to support everyday continuous improvement, is workflow visualization (Liker, 2004). Taking inspiration from the manufacturing sector, the general surgery ward in our study has since 2011 implemented and continuously developed two visualization boards, one physical and one digital. By studying the continuous development and enactment of these visualization boards, our overarching aim is to unravel the mechanisms underlying the mutual constitution of competing institutional logics and sociomaterial entanglements. Our main research question is: *How can visualization artifacts afford and constrain organizational change in institutionally complex contexts?* More specifically, we are interested in two sub-questions:

- *How do visualization artifacts become a part of the enactment of institutional logics?*
- *How do multiple institutional logics, enacted in sociomaterial practices, shape affordances and individual focus of attention?*

In addition to shedding light on the mechanisms underlying the mutual constitution of competing institutional logics and sociomaterial entanglements, our focus on visualization artifacts responds to a recent call for research dedicated to questions of how visibility in organizations impacts individual, managerial, and, consequently, organizational attention and sensemaking (Kaplan, 2011; Locke & Lowe, 2012; Meyer et al., 2013; Yakura, 2013).

Our case shows how the implementation, use and development of the digital and physical visualization boards direct the staff's attention on particular features of the operations and provide occasions for the staff to make sense of the new Lean work practices. By focusing our analysis on how affordances emerge in sociomaterial practices, we show how visual representations construct the operational reality in a way that makes the principles of the Lean logic central to the staff's efforts to develop effective work practices.

Our study makes two contributions. First, we show how the perceived affordances of a technology are created from the experience of using several different technologies and how the rejection of one technology can simultaneously constitute another. Second, we show how visualization artifacts, entangled in sociomaterial practices, can shape individual focus of attention and thus facilitate the integration of a new institutional logic in operational practice.

In addition, our study suggests that there is potential in mutually informing the research streams on institutional logics and sociomateriality. The influence of the practice turn in IS and Organization research has inspired scholars within the sociomaterial as well as the micro-institutional foundations of organizing to go beyond traditional dualisms of subject and object, social and structure (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Kellogg, 2009; Orlikowski, 2007; Zilber, 2002). Based on the results from this study, we believe that cross-pollination between the conversation within institutional theory on the role of embedded agency at the micro-level of organizing, and the sociomateriality discourse within IS research, can lead to important new insights on the mutual constitution of technologies and human action.

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