OPEN STRATEGY INITIATIVES: OPEN, IT-ENABLED EPISODES OF STRATEGIC PRACTICE

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Abstract

The concept of openness has become widespread in organizations, driven by the advent of the internet and advances in information technology, with open approaches now a particular interest to information systems researchers. Open principles have more recently been adopted by organizations in a strategic context, through openness in strategy processes. Widely labelled 'open strategy', research into the phenomenon has primarily focused on increased transparency and participation in strategy-making, with less attention on the actual practice of open strategy. In particular, there has been limited focus on its episodic nature, with open strategy, in many cases, representing temporary instances of strategic ideation within the wider operational and strategic conduct of organizations. This paper intends to extend current open strategy definitions by conceptually expanding Hendry and Seidl's (2003) framework for studying 'strategic episodes', helping to explain the temporary complexion of the phenomenon. This analysis also explores how information systems are central to this form of open, IT-enabled strategic practice. We introduce empirical data from two case studies to conceptualize the intermittent nature of what we define as 'open strategy initiatives', and conclude by outlining what this on-going research intends to contribute in the future.

Keywords: Information technology, Information systems, Open strategy, Strategy-as-practice, Strategic episodes.

1   INTRODUCTION

The increasing relevance of openness in information systems (IS) research has been driven by the advent of the internet and fundamental advances in information technology (IT). The way in which people use these technologies to exchange information and knowledge has also been a catalyst for openness, and has enabled wider, low or no-cost access to such sources (Benkler, 2006). This has in turn created new possibilities for more open approaches and practices in organizations and society in general. Theories such as open-source software (e.g. Feller and Fitzgerald, 2000), open innovation (e.g. Chesbrough, 2003) and crowd wisdom (e.g. Surowiecki, 2004; Howe, 2006) have been integrated increasingly as operational concepts of open, IT-enabled business models (Chesbrough, 2006). These business models are driven by new forms of software such as social media, and hardware including smart phones, tablets and other portable communication devices (Leonardi et al., 2013). For Conboy et al. (2015), openness broadly relates to accessibility of knowledge, transparency of action and permeability of organizational structures, and thus, how openness in its various forms has potential implications for individuals, organizations and society.

Increasingly, openness is also being used in a strategic context through open organizational strategy processes. Whereas strategy has more traditionally been regarded as the exclusive role of top management, there has been growing interest in the concept of strategy-making involving more participatory and transparent practices. This phenomenon has appeared in literature under various titles, most commonly 'open strategy' (Chesbrough and Appleyard, 2007; Whittington et al., 2011; Matzler et al., 2014; Morton et al., 2015a). The term has been widely used to highlight the open practices which organizations might be using to help define their strategies. Also relevant to open strategy is the practice turn in social theory, dating back to the 1980's (Whittington, 2006), in particular the strategy-as-practice domain, which associates more closely with the micro level of strategy, investigating the everyday actions of strategists, and the activity of 'strategizing' (Whittington, 1996). Ma and Seidl (2014) support this comparison, and highlight open strategy as rising in prominence in practice-based strategy research.

The principles of theories such as open-source, open innovation and crowd wisdom are also, by their very nature, relevant to open strategy, underlining how collaboration, harnessing the power of the crowd, and thinking outside the traditional confines of the firm can result in positive, more dynamic outcomes. Furthermore, the knowledge-based economy (Blackler, 1995) has marked an important change in inter-intra organizational processes, including implementation of collaborative initiatives in more open environments. IS use is also a recurrent theme in open strategy literature (e.g. Newstead and Lanzerotti, 2010; Haefliger et al., 2011, Stieger et al., 2012; Amrollahi et al., 2014; Baptista et al., 2015), with open strategy typically being facilitated by social technology platforms to enable conversation between multiple actors. This bears relevance to the practice lens in strategy research, with IS use being common in strategy-as-practice research outputs, including studies of strategy tools in use (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015) and socio-materiality in strategy practice (Vaara and Whittington, 2012; Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013).

The emergent phenomenon of open strategy emphasizes core characteristics of increased transparency and inclusiveness, with both internal and external stakeholders. A recent attempt to consolidate open strategy definitions (Tavakoli et al., 2015), also fuses the concept of transparency and inclusiveness with the critical role of IT. However, researched less extensively has been the actual practice of open strategy. Particularly there has been scant focus on its episodic nature. Open strategy, in many cases, entails temporary instances of strategic ideation and reflection within the wider operational and strategic conduct of organizations (e.g. Stieger et al., 2012; Tavakoli et al., 2015). This paper, therefore, aims to extend current definitions of open strategy by conceptually expanding Hendry and Seidl's (2003) framework for studying 'strategic episodes', helping to emphasize and explain the temporary, episodic nature of the open strategy phenomenon; something previous studies and definitions of open strategy have largely overlooked. We also intend to further research the dynamic between openness and IT by interrogating how IS and social technologies are central to this form of open, IT-enabled strategic practice. The paper is structured to first discuss strategic episodes, through Luhmann's 'social systems

theory' and conception of an 'episode' (Luhmann, 1995), and then introduce preliminary empirical data from two on-going case studies to help conceptualize the intermittent nature of what we call 'open strategy initiatives'. The conclusion summarizes our argument, offers a definition for open strategy in the form of open strategy initiatives, and outlines what this going research intends to contribute in the future.

2 LUHMANN'S SOCIAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND STRATEGIC EPISODES

2.1 Overview and framework for analysis

The theory of strategic episodes forms the theoretical background for this paper, and was outlined by Hendry and Seidl (2003), who draw on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory (1995). Of particular relevance here is Luhmann's theory of an 'episode', which he describes as not only an event, but a sequence of communications with a clearly defined beginning and end (Makino, 2013). Hendry and Seidl (2003) use this as a useful means of guiding research into strategy, especially the routine nature of strategic practice, which they call strategic episodes. These episodes provide mechanisms by which organizations can suspend their routine structures and initiate periods of collaboration, reflection and potential change. In relation to the practice of strategy, Hendry and Seidl (2003, p.175) "draw attention to the routine nature of strategic episodes and to their organizational role as the effective locus of strategic practice and the interaction between strategic and operating routines". They further explain that it is through such episodes that organizations can suspend routine structures, communication and hierarchy and create an opportunity and environment for reflexive strategic practice. The beginning of the episode constitutes a switch from existing operational context into a strategic context, switching back to the existing operational context upon the episode's conclusion.

Hendry and Seidl further highlight that these episodic communications are considered as exceptional, and that they will come to a clearly defined end, after which an analogous switch back to everyday routine and structure will occur. They also emphasize that within these episodes it is the discursive structures which are most likely to change, but might also include spatio-temporal structures including what communications can take place, and between whom. This framework for analyzing strategic episodes is particularly useful because it revolves around their initiation, conduct and termination, providing a foundation both for the analysis of different types of episodes (e.g. workshops, board meetings) and for a comparative analysis of alternative episodic mechanisms. The following descriptions for each of the three phases of the framework help further explain these areas for the context of this paper, and provide a framework for analysis of open strategy case studies. In particular, we outline key characteristics in Hendry and Seidl's framework which shape strategic episodes through the phases of initiation, conduct and termination.

Initiation (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, p.189-190); "The way in which episodes are set up, within which the focus is on the determination of which structures are or are not suspended and on the necessary 'decoupling' of the episode from the organization as a whole". Important here are the choice of participants and that there are clear specifications in terms of how the episode is time-limited or goal-oriented, or a combination of the two. Additionally, initiation of episodes is often driven by change to top management, or facilitation by external facilitators (e.g. consultants). These 'outsiders' bring with them new discursive structures and disrupt existing structures of hierarchy and communication, helping people transition into a 'strategic mode'. The organization simply needs to create 'spaces' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015) in which this can happen. The initiation of the episode should clearly legitimate a switch of context, and a degree of physical and spatial separation of the episode (e.g. in terms of location or communicative norms) helps reinforce temporal separation.

Conduct (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, p.191-192); "The ways in which they are conducted, within which the focus is on the discourses generated and the types of reflection achieved". Particularly important here is the episode itself, especially the techniques used, avoiding those which participants might be

familiar with as part of everyday operational routines. Additionally, the episode should enable the participants to communicate effectively. The strategic episodes can be conducted in either a formal and official manner (e.g. strategy board meetings) or can be more informal and unofficial in nature (e.g. coffee machine conversations).

Termination (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, p.190); "The ways in which they are terminated, within which the focus is on the mechanisms for 're-coupling' the strategic reflection with the organization". An important part of the termination process is the ability to reflect the end of the episode, to allow some of the proposals to at least be considered for selection (i.e. transfer of products from an episode back into the wider organization). The outcomes of the episode may lead to no results, and can be terminated without repercussions. Alternatively, the episode may yield results which are taken forward for implementation after termination. These results may be communicated to the wider system through documentation or presentations, for example. Hendry and Seidl also signify that the purpose of such practices being bounded in an episode allow for senior management to maintain control over them, with failure and termination possible without jeopardizing the wider organization. In this respect, informal, unplanned episodes are harder to control, and organizations may try to contain episodes to formal communication channels through senior management 'gatekeepers'.

2.2 Strategic episodes in other research

The theory of strategic episodes has also been translated into wider literature, including the IS and strategy-as-practice domains. For example, Morrison (2009) conceptualizes the IBM 'Jamming' concept as being episodes of organizational communication and strategy-making. Jamming, which we explain in more detail in the next section, has been mentioned recurrently in open strategy literature (e.g. Whittington et al., 2011; Morton et al., 2015b). Morrison, similar to Hendry and Seidl (2003), highlights a number of features which drive the Jamming process. This shows such open initiatives to be focused around specific topics; specific to the group participating, which can include both internal and external stakeholders; scalable beyond the limits of physical meetings, increasing potential for a higher number of participants; and time-limited, typically running over a few days, so they are not part of an everyday organizational routine.

Jarzabkowski and Seidl's (2008) research examines social practices of strategy and explores strategizing episodes as micro-evolutionary mechanisms in the strategy process, looking specifically at the episodic nature of strategic meetings in shaping strategy. Additionally, Johnson et al. (2007, p.58-59) explore Hendry and Seidl's work on strategic episodes, predominantly from the viewpoint of it being an "attractive unit of analysis for research". They also view that it is within such episodes that strategizing predominantly takes place, with potential for altering strategic trajectory.

Particularly relevant to our argument are calls for a joint research agenda for the strategy-as-practice and IS strategy fields (Arvidsson et al., 2014; Peppard et al., 2014; Whittington, 2014). Authors have highlighted the relevance of strategic episodes to the field of IS, whilst emphasizing how studying episodes of strategy-making through IS is now significant because of their natural synergy. Galliers (2011) also expresses that, increasingly, IS strategy and business strategy will become interlinked, due to the likelihood that organizational processes and strategies involve IT components. Whittington (2014, p.88) also states that such a combination would help to further explore the under-examined role of new and taken for granted technologies in strategy work, and allow for a greater understanding of materiality in strategy practice. Whittington also outlines potential research areas which could explore "episodes of information system strategizing", and "social media and technology in strategizing".

Ultimately, Whittington emphasizes that zooming in on tightly defined 'slices' of strategy practice would allow researchers to reveal more about the roles of information technology practices and practitioners in actual strategy praxis through empirical work. This involves a shift in analysis away from the whole organization and organizational performance, and towards one where episodes form case studies, minutely examined in series within one or across multiple organizations. Performance here involves "more than organizational outcomes; performance is also about how people 'perform' their

roles in praxis" (Whittington, 2014, p.88). Our research attends to these calls through a focus on micro level, open and IT-enabled strategic practices as central themes, and was a further motivation for addressing open strategy initiatives as strategic episodes.

3   OPEN STRATEGY INITIATIVES AS IT-ENABLED EPISODES OF STRATEGIC PRACTICE: ON-GOING CASE STUDIES

3.1   Outline of cases and analysis method

The discussion of open strategy and strategic episodes leads to preliminary analysis of two on-going case studies. At the time of writing, these cases are being examined through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and relevant documentation data (including access granted to social platforms used for open strategy, and relevant planning and output documents). These rich sources of data will help with understanding and explaining the social phenomena at hand (Myers, 2013) to reveal praxis and practices (Schatzki, 2002; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007) that underpin open strategy initiatives.

This preliminary analysis draws data from a selection of these interviews and documentation provided by the organizations, and are used here to present an overview narrative to express our argument regarding open strategy initiatives as temporary examples of IT-driven strategic practice. We specifically focus on the characteristics which shape strategic episodes, and, using Hendry and Seidl's (2003) framework, analyze how these form open strategy initiatives as IT-enabled episodes of strategic practice. We conceptualize the initiation, conduct and termination stages in relation to these open strategy cases, enabling understanding of how they have been developed to exist as temporary occurrences within the larger structure and routines of the organization. In this conceptualization, the characteristic of IT-enabledness (Tavakoli et al., 2015) is added, due to its crucial relevance to the open strategy phenomenon, and as an enabler for physical and spatial separation between operational and strategy contexts. The cases are selected because they offer holistic data about their initiation, conduct and termination, allowing presentation of a complete strategic episode, and thus complementing the aims of this paper. The two cases are not intended to offer a comparison, but rather two distinct examples of open strategy with varying time-scales and objectives.

The first case introduced explores the use of an IBM hosted 'InnovationJam' to facilitate an open strategy initiative for a department of a public defense organization (Defense-co). The second case examines the use of social collaborative platforms by a tourism organization based in a European capital city (Tourism-group), to allow internal and external stakeholders to help co-create their five-year tourism strategy.

3.2   Case one: Defense-co InnovationJam

The term Jamming has been highlighted as being an illustrative example of open strategy through internal inclusion of a wider range of actors in strategy practice (Whittington et al., 2011). IBM first used the term to describe their internal massively parallel online conferences (Bjelland and Wood, 2008). Taking the name from the activity of musicians jamming, IBM set out to replicate the notion of creative collaboration, between people who might never have met before (Bhalla, 2010). Jamming activity has also been linked in similarity to the concept of crowdsourcing (Howe, 2009) to capture the wisdom of the crowd for organizations to explore and exploit new strategic directions.

The IBM facilitated Defense-co InnovationJam was hosted on a web collaboration platform, lasted two days, involved sixty seven participants and generated ninety strategic ideas with a combined total of two hundred and eighty seven discussion posts. It was focused around three strategic topics. The number, and type of participants involved and the use of IT to enable more openness in strategy-making, especially at an idea generation level, resonates closely with the existing definitions of open strategy mentioned previously. The event was formally arranged, which involved nine months of planning, including a 'trial Jam'. Additionally, the activity was focused on the output from a previous initiative

where the organization had asked employees how they could cut organizational 'red tape', to make their roles less restricted, and also had the aim of engaging employees in on-going transformation of the organization led by their new Chief Information Officer (CIO). Both aspects fit with the characteristics mentioned by Hendry and Seidl regarding new leadership and outside facilitation, as emphasized by one of the interviewees; an IBM executive responsible for organizing the Jam event:

"A new 3 star general came to the organization and saw previous failings, which caused the old organization to essentially fail and be rebranded. He came out and asked his employees, 'what needs to change', 'what's stopping the organization from working'. From the red tape output we asked if he'd be interested in doing a Jam for his employees…and have a focused discussion around strategy".

Another interviewee, an employee of IBM's Jam team, emphasized that Jams are formally arranged episodes as part of the wider organizational structure. The interviewee's summary of Jamming was similar in nature to Hendry and Seidl's concept of a strategic episode, including an emphasis on how the outcomes should be reflected afterwards:

"We view a Jam as a short term intervention where you can bring everyone together on a really focused set of topics, of significant consequence to the organization. They are structured in such a way that the process we have behind it, it's not really the tools, it's very much the process. How you get engagement before the event with the key stakeholders, how they are aligned to the key issues that you're trying to challenge, and how you steer that debate over say three days, to have tangible outcomes at the end of the period with known owners and drivers and true engagement across the organization. What I find with the Jams is that when a new CEO joins the organization, they have their own views, their own strategy and it's an amazingly good way of getting the message to everyone in the organization".

One of the interviewees, a member of the IBM CTO team and moderator for the InnovationJam also confirmed that Defense-co were planning to use outcomes from the Jam, and that they would feed into future strategies. This is also confirmed in the Jam outcome analysis, where the organization has mentioned wanting to take forward at least three ideas from each of the three Jam topics:

"We take a step back from the Jam once it's finished, and once we've provided some analysis, we don't push for the organization involved to implement any of the ideas. In this case it was positive and I know they're working on inputting some of the ideas participants came up with. Exactly how I wouldn't be too sure, but it's something we'll keep an eye out for".

As such, the InnovationJam can be conceived as a strategic episode with definitive phases of initiation, conduct and termination. The initiative has also demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of informing potential new strategic directions.

3.3   Case two: Tourism-group strategy co-creation project

The Tourism-group strategy co-creation project offers an example of an episode which is significantly longer in length, and was structured in three main stages. The first was an "open strategy meeting" with around thirty participants; mostly internal stakeholders, but also people external to the organization who were involved with local tourism. One of the organizers explained that this was a way of discussing strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities, and as a way of launching the open strategy process.

The same interviewee explained that the second phase was one of two larger processes within the open strategy initiative, both of which utilized an online social technology platform. With the help of a consultancy firm, Tourism-group implemented the technology platform and invited over six hundred and fifty thousand people from around the world to contribute to an idea contest about how the city might improve its tourism:

"Then we started in January 2014 to find a partner who can provide a platform and provide some expertise. They provided the platform, the platform was used for the idea contest, so it was specially designed for our needs and our corporate design".

This lasted one month, involved eight hundred participants and generated five hundred and forty six ideas. The 'best' ideas from this were then refined for the final stage and focused into eight main topics, inviting around two thousand five hundred participants from the city; including politicians, business owners and other stakeholders to participate openly using the same online platform. Of this number, two hundred and fifty five contributed to further discussion and refinement. One interviewee from Tourism-group described this phase as being a more focused part of the initiative, with the aim of getting buy-in for strategic ideas:

"So this was really important because they all had the possibility to comment on ideas. There were two hundred and thirty seven idea comments, and seventy four buy-ins, where somebody said they will engage and help with this idea. The target groups within the second phase were the key stakeholders, politicians, tourism experts working in the (city name) tourism industry. Our advisory board rated them also, the best ten or twenty, and these were included in the final strategy".

The project organizers also agreed that the focus of the initiative was short term, rather than a long term change of routine for the organization:

"The focus here was more short term. And this is why it was nice to receive some awards, and also the top management knows that the world is interested about open strategy and what we've been doing".

The final reflections from the organizing team was that, although the project was seen as a success, winning awards for its innovative strategic format and resulting in a five-year strategic plan, some of the structures used have not successfully translated into the routines of the organization as much as they would have hoped:

"I think there would have been the possibility to do a bit more, and to have more results and more buy-ins, and to do more with the results from this open process. And, to keep the engagement level quite high; how do you keep this alive, how do you carry forward ideas, I think this is a point where we may not have succeeded. We could have done a bit better".

In this case the organization was able to suspend conventional strategy approaches through an open, IT-enabled episode. However, although now informed by a wealth of insights, managers decided not to persist with further open strategy initiatives. The episode saw substantial adaptation to strategy praxis, but this was not sustained to feed into transforming long term strategic practice.

3.4   Conceptualization of cases as open strategy initiatives

Following a narrative overview of the two cases in relation to the characteristics and framework for strategic episodes, we conceptualize the cases to represent what we call open strategy initiatives. Table 1 shows the two case studies conceptualized as open strategy initiatives, using the previously mentioned characteristics for strategic episodes and relating these to the initiation, conduct and termination of these two varying instances of strategy practice. For the initiation phase, we emphasize the change in leadership or external facilitation which drives strategic episodes, and that the episode is often time-limited and/or goal-oriented in nature. For the conduct phase, we highlight Hendry and Seidl's (2003) emphasis of the formal or informal nature of the episode, and add the characteristic of IT-enabledness (Tavakoli, 2015), to highlight the central role of IT in open strategy. IT is also core to open strategy in enabling the physical and spatial separation between operational routines and the new strategic context. For the termination phase, we emphasize the plan for reflection and outcomes, and the potential to feed new ideas or strategic insight into the wider organizational routine. Through using these core characteristics from Hendry and Seidl's framework (2003), we highlight how open strategy is often episodic in nature, rather than being representative of a continuous aspect of strategic context.

The characteristics which form the table demonstrate how the process of open strategy, although often different and varying in aspects such as driver, goal, length, method, and outcome, can be defined and conceptualized in the context of Hendry and Seidl's (2003) theory of strategic episodes. This conceptualization also offers a processual overview of each case, showing the process with clear points which mark their beginning and end. This attends to Whittington's (2014) call to adopt new, useful

methods to focus upon and analyze slices of IS driven strategic practice, whilst contributing to the increasingly common link between strategy research and the relevance of IS and IT (Galliers, 2011).

Open strategy initiative	Initiation		Conduct		Termination	
	Change in leadership or external facilitation	Time-limited and/or goal-oriented	IT-enabled	Formal and official or informal and unofficial	Plan for reflection and outcomes	Feed into wider organizational routine
Defense-co InnovationJam	New CIO, with facilitation by IBM	Two days in length, goal to generate ideas around three core strategic topics	Enabled by an IBM social technology platform	Formally structured, with IBM moderators and senior management involved	At least three ideas generated from each strategic topic are under consideration	Intend to repeat, but not until ideas are implemented from this initiative
Tourism-group strategy co-creation project	Facilitation by external consultancy firm	Eleven months in length, goal to generate ideas and get stakeholder buy-in for new strategy	Enabled by bespoke social technology platform, created by external consultancy firm	Formally structured by Tourism-group and partners	Led to formal formulation and presentation of the new tourism strategy	No plan to repeat the initiative, not universally supported by top management

Table 1.   Case studies as open strategy initiatives, against the framework for strategic episodes (adapted from Hendry and Seidl, 2003).

4   CONCLUSION AND INTENDED CONTRIBUTION

Our research so far indicates that open strategy is episodic in nature, and is being used to enable time-limited periods of strategic idea generation and reflection. We also argue that rather than replacing other strategy tools such as meetings, workshops and formal documents, open strategy is complementing these, and using IT to embrace the capabilities of collaboration with a larger number of people. Our analysis also suggests that in many instances, open strategy does not represent a universal opening of strategy-making methods, but one that is more temporary, with potential to become increasingly present as part of everyday organizational structures. We also recognize that not all open strategy activities will clearly fit into the temporal mould of an open strategy initiative, and may not be formally structured with clearly defined initiation and termination points. However, in many instances, including those introduced in this paper, the concept of open strategy initiatives contributes an extension of current definitions and a useful framework for studying open phenomena in strategy. Using the theory of strategic episodes (Hendry and Seidl, 2003), we define open strategy initiatives as: 'Formally organized events with clear points of initiation, conduct and termination, which utilize information technology to generate discussion around focused topics relating to organizational strategy'.

We intend to progress this research by using this framework to establish a 'rhetoric or reality' approach to analyzing our on-going cases. This means a main objective of finding out more about the process of open strategy initiatives and to establish how the ideas collected from a wider range of organizational actors do, if at all, lead to new strategic directions. Our primary research question therefore asks 'What practices do organizational actors engage in to construct strategic ideas in open strategy initiatives, and how are these ideas subsequently used by organizations?'. Addressing this question, and emphasizing the episodic nature of open strategy will be especially important as open strategy becomes a more ubiquitous feature of organizational life, and needs not only a more confined definition, but also means of systematic analysis. This will not only help to discover more about how those involved in open strategy contribute, but also to what extent the actual initiatives are effective in informing future strategies. This is ultimately where our on-going research hopes to make its contribution.

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