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Maris, I.; Huizing, A.; Bouman, W.

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Studying the Wicked and the Creative: On the Practice of Designing Social Media

Ileana Maris

University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Ard Huizing

University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Wim Bouman

University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Abstract

In this abstract, we propose a practice-based approach to the study of design and introduce the concept of designing as an epistemic practice. We outline the theoretical premises of this study as well as the intended theoretical contributions.

Keywords: design, practice-based approach, epistemic objects, actor networks, social media

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Studying the Wicked and the Creative: On the Practice of Designing Social Media

Ileana Maris, University of Amsterdam Business School, Roetersstraat 11, 1018 WB Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Phone number: +31205254101, e-mail: i.maris@uva.nl.

Ard Huizing, University of Amsterdam Business School, a.huizing@uva.nl.

Wim Bouman, University of Amsterdam Business School, w.bouman@gmail.com.

Keywords: design, practice-based approach, epistemic objects, actor networks, social media.

The predominant design science paradigm in the field of Information Systems has conceptualized design as a rational process. Hence, our current theorizing represents the design process as a set of systematic activities, in which scientific knowledge is applied to create and evaluate an IT artifact aimed at solving a well defined organizational problem (Hevner *et al.* 2004). Despite the many useful contributions that design science research has generated so far, we would argue that the paradigm helps us tell only one side of the story. Design (or designing) is not merely a systematic endeavor but also a creative, wicked undertaking characterized by uncertainty (Buchanan 1992), learning by doing and negotiations of knowledge, ethics and aesthetics about how to design a good and beautiful artifact. So far, Information Systems researchers have given little attention to the creative side of designing. However, in order to fully understand and be able to improve the design process, we need to reveal and explore designers' own worldviews and work practices as they go about creating an artifact.

Drawing inspiration from practice-based approaches as developed by Schatzki (1996), Gherardi (2009, 2010) and Corradi *et al.* (2010) and the works of Knorr Cetina (1997, 2001) and Latour (2005), we propose the concept of *designing as an epistemic practice*. With this concept, we shift away from the more rational approaches to design and towards a focus on the “designerly ways of knowing, thinking and acting” (Cross 2001). Such an approach is particularly insightful in the context of designing social media, where the aim is creating an artifact that evokes participation and engagement. Three theoretical premises underlie our exploration:

- First, designing is an object-mediated practice, performed in dynamic actor networks, where objects refer to all non-human entities designers associate with and work with.
- Second, designing is epistemic as processes of learning and knowing are fundamental to the stability and continuation of the practice. Knowing and learning are relational activities, undertaken in practice, and nurtured by the unfolding nature of the epistemic objects designers work with.
- Last, designing is an ordering practice for both the actors (human and non-human) performing it and for those engaging with its outcome, in this case the participants in social media. The research questions that will guide our inquiry are:

What are the designerly ways of knowing, thinking and acting of designing an engaging social media?

To answer this research question, we will study the practice of designing a social media for the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The social media is intended to engage the interested public in sharing with each other and the museum their life histories. Exploring the dynamics of this project is an excellent opportunity to gain insights into the designers' actual work practices as they go about designing an engaging social media.

The aim of this study is to broaden our current understandings and theories of designing by means of a practice based inquiry, by providing a conceptual and methodological toolkit for the exploration of the creative, epistemic and wicked nature of designing. We are looking forward to engaging with the IFIP8.2 audience in a constructive discussion about this proposal.

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