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An arena for things? Sociomaterial staging of strategists, devices and praxis

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Abstract

Strategy practices involve social as well as material elements. More specifically, strategy formulation can be viewed as an entanglement of soft and hard materiality (i.e. procedures and templates) with social players, such as CEOs, managers and consultants. Apart from this sociomaterial perspective used, a Goffmanian perspective of staging is adopted, inquiring into what arenas are staged for strategy formulation, what types of devices are involved, how they enable or constrain strategy formulation and what the dynamics between devices and the arenas where they are staged are. Using material from an ethnographic study of strategy formulation, three (front) staged arenas are identified, as is their back stage intermediation. A series of devices are purposely mobilised by management and consultants first in staging the managers in a more traditional strategy workshop with the employees as spectators. Second, staging the employees in an open space workshop as strategy practitioners. Third, the employees are staged as strategy practitioners in strategy project work. Most project groups worked as expected, but one of the strategy project group process constitutes a rare exception, as staging and mobilisation of devices lead to unanticipated events, triggering extraordinary management activity.

Introduction

A strategy-as-practice (SAP) lens is used here to examine strategy formulation. This main perspective, extended with sociomaterial concepts (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) and the concept of staging (Goffman, 1959), emphasises that the context of materialisation is important and that 'tools' are not really influential, unless they are made to perform in a context, an arena, which is staged and which is staging the possibility of entanglement. We focus on three staged arenas: a strategy workshop, an open space workshop and a series of strategy sub-projects with involvement of managers and employees. In the strategy sub-projects, the focus is on a project that developed in an unexpected manner. The mutual entanglement of the social and material practices of strategy practitioners is here understood as prescription, inscription or conscription (called scriptions (Henderson, 1999; Hutchby, 2001)). Moreover, the strategy formulation process may involve more unexpected occasions and events, such as the raising of otherwise silenced issues. The aim of the paper is, through the scriptions of strategy devices in the formulation part of the strategy process, to

analyse the staging of strategy arenas and the entanglement of the sociomaterial practices of strategy practitioners, raising the following questions:

– What arenas are staged for strategy formulation, and how do they impact on the emergence of strategy?
– What types of devices are involved in the strategy process, and how do they enable or constrain strategy formulation?
– What are the dynamics between devices and the arenas where they are staged?

These problematisations refer to points raised by Pinch (2010) and Latour (1993). Pinch's discussion of materiality in the sociology of Goffman demonstrates how materiality (devices) plays a role in Goffman's notions of stages, front and back stage, and role distance, highlighting that materiality is deeply entangled in those 'social' concepts and that materiality enables and constrains staging, constructing spectators and performers. Latour (1993) famously asked about the parliament of things in his discussion of quasi-objects as opposed to an ontological split between social and materiality. The empirical material for the article is derived from one of the authors' PhD thesis, which is a longitudinal study of a strategy formulation process using SAP (Friis, 2012). The data/case is reinterpreted in the context of the objectives of this paper. Our contribution has three elements. First, we substantiate that formal strategy arenas can be fruitfully exploited when adapted to a context. Second, we provide empirical underpinning of the understanding of strategising by providing cases of strategy practices with material elements. Third, our theoretical framework and the analysis elaborate on the linkages between the staging, i.e. the active framing of the arena context, and the use of devices.

The strategy-as-practice positions

As the SAP approaches develop, certain central positions and notions become stabilised, whereas others continue to be debated. Situated practices in strategy is one central notion, and in the SAP perspective, strategy is often conceptualised as *"a situated, socially accomplished activity constructed through the interactions of multiple actors"* (Jarzabkowski, 2005:7), *"while strategising comprises those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity"* (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007:7-

8). Thus, in the SAP perspective, strategy is usually not understood as merely a fixed property (in a document or on a PowerPoint presentation) of organisations, something they have. It is something people do, and this 'doing of strategy' or 'strategising' raise questions about how multiple actors strategise and what practices they draw upon.

Moreover, in the SAP perspective, a general accepted framework has been developed, highlighting praxis, practitioners and practices of strategy (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Vaara and Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2006), and further conceptualised according to type of practitioner and level of praxis (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009).

According to Whittington (2007), strategy praxis is the activities of strategy, and praxis can be viewed as a stream of such activities over time (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). Praxis overlaps with strategy process, *"tracing processes and activities over time, and linking them to organizational outcomes"* (Whittington, 2007:1578), and practice and practitioner go beyond strategy process, whereas praxis is the local stream of activities, the local institutionalised 'best practice' developed over time. The overlap is clear (Whittington, 2007). The differences are to be found in the 'practice' category in particular, but also in the 'practitioner' category.

Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) and Vaara and Whittington (2012) have put a face on strategy practitioners, understood as those directly involved in the strategy making, often including CEOs, middle managers, consultants and employees, and indirectly policy-makers, the media and business gurus. Most studies of practitioners have been focusing on the top managers (Jarzabkowski, 2005) or middle managers (Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005). Here we would add that the relation between the performers of strategy and those construed to be spectators is not unimportant in understanding strategy praxis as other practices (Pinch, 2010 (drawing on Goffman)). More scholars have defined practices (Carter et al., 2008; Chia, 2004; Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008; Reckwitz, 2002). Practices are routines and norms of strategy work (Carter et al., 2008, Chia, 2004) *"not just obvious ones such as strategy reviews and off-sites, but also those embedded in academic and consulting tools (Porterian analysis, hypothesis testing etc.) and more materiel technologies and artefacts (PowerPoints, flip-charts etc.)"* (Jarzabkowski and Whittington 2008:101). Reckwitz (2002) notes the interrelatedness of practices and their materiality, but moves on to develop the embodied aspect of practices, *"a repository of 'background coping skills' upon which actors unconsciously draw as part of their everyday 'being' within the world"* (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009:82). Thus, strategy practices are what practitioners use to strategise (Jarzabkowski and

Whittington, 2008). Strategy practices can take the form of social, physical and operation procedures, such as heuristics, scripts, routines and languages (Omicini and Ossowski, 2004).

Several researchers have looked into specific events in strategy processes, such as strategy workshops (Jarrett and Stiles, 2010; Johnson et al., 2010; Räisänen et al., 2013) and meetings in the strategy process (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). It is common to raise a flag of scepticism as to whether these events have any practical implications. Jarret and Stiles (2010) view them in a context of a forced, emergent process, where single events are rarely decisive, Johnson (2010) describes the workshop as rituals and Räisänen et al. (2013) interpret the workshop as a staged rehearsal. The Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) analysis of meetings shows how strategy meetings can either stabilise existing strategy direction or propose variation based on more structuring characteristics.

SAP, strategy devices and staging

Orlikowski and Scott (2008, 2012) have proposed a sociomaterial approach to information systems and their use context. Here, they refer to a set of studies appreciating the inseparability of the social and the material. Orlikowski and Scott (2008) focus on information systems, a specific type of materiality; further, in a strategy context, there is a need to address the specific materialities characterised by strategy tools (Spee et al., 2011; Skærbæk and Tryggestad, 2010). Rather than being 'just' material, many strategy tools rest in a tension field between being physically present while being absent and some place invisible and in a sense abstract; at a time localised and delocalised.

We suggest 'strategy devices' as an overarching term for physical and/or abstract material elements, things, used in strategising practices (Gendron et al., 2007). Strategy devices, we argue, either combine soft and hard materialisation or just one of them. Some elements are best understood as abstract text and others are physically manifested. This combination also encompasses symbolic and functional aspects of materiality. We suggest that strategy devices always become coupled to strategy practitioners in the process of constituting new strategy praxis. The social has power over the materiality to enable a purposeful activity. However, in praxis, the social players do not always have full control over the materiality.

Staging of strategy arenas

Strategy devices have an aspect of creating certain opportunities and spaces for strategising. It is a sociomaterial praxis to stage such spaces or arenas. According to Nordquist (2012:26), a SAP scholar, *"the strategic arena represents a platform, or a venue, for communication and strategic dialogue"*, and it is defined *"through the dialogues around issues that are strategic to the individual organization"* (ibid).

'Staging' is here understood as a construction of a physical arena and occasion for an act (Goffman, 1959; Clausen and Ushinaka, 2007). This emerges through interaction and often involves team performance (Van Praet, 2009). Staging of strategy arenas is conceptualised as a performative becoming of a collaborative sociomaterial agency (Clausen and Ushinaka, 2007). Importantly, as noted by Pinch (2010), staging involves the construction of performers (on stage) and audience, spectators to the events on stage. It also involves agent tactics of performing front stage as well as back stage, and finally, but importantly, sociomateriality is part and parcel of these staging processes. Materiality can enable these practices directly by, for example, acting as separators between front and back stage, by acting as properties, stage requisites, but it may also constrain the performance of agency (Pinch, 2010).

This staging concept differs from other strategy and enterprise research conceptualisations (Cooper, 1990; Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2005; Nordquist, 2012). First, it differs from rationalist models of strategy, where staging is related to decisions on the stepwise progress of strategy formulation, focusing on the sequence of tasks (Cooper, 1990; Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2005). Moreover, 'staging' here is more malleable than the arena concept suggested by Nordquist (2012). Nordquist suggests that arenas are open or closed, formal or informal. And even overlapping, hybrid and/or competing. In our conceptualisation, arenas in strategy praxis are emergent and negotiated, and boundaries in time and space have to be arranged and maintained. The process of staging is a mutually constitutive one, shaping the arena and the agency at a time.

Sociomaterial practices and the role of scriptions

We distinguish between three different forms of entanglement between human and non-human elements: inscriptions, prescriptions and conscriptions (Henderson, 1999; Latour, 2005). Inscriptions are understood as visual or verbal devices that are arranged and carried out by (human) actors (Latour and Woolgar, 1979). Inscriptions allow actors to transport knowledge across time and space.

Prescription is understood as what a device allows or forbids from the actors, human and non-human, during their reading of the object. Objects both enable and constrain action (Akrich et al., 1992). Prescription resonates with what has also been labelled 'affordance', covering structures in materiality that set a certain range of possible 'readings' or interpretations (Hutchby, 2001). Prescription can thus be understood as the materiality influencing the human element.

The third type of scription, conscription, is understood as mutual inscriptions between human/social and non-human/material elements. A conscription device and/or practice thus enable a mutual entanglement of the social and the material. Conscription involves the complementarity of inscription and prescription (Henderson, 1999).

All three types of scriptions impact on the performance of the strategy process. They might enable or constrain it in their own characteristic manner.

The framework

We propose to use the framework developed by Whittington (2006) depicting the relations between extra-organisational practices and how they are bundled in the inter-organisational strategy praxis in the actions of the strategy practitioners. This SAP framework we then extend by incorporating strategy devices, and their prescription, inscription and conscription, and staging of strategic arenas (see Figure 1). The strategy devices, be they with hard or soft features, present in the extra-organisational environment are brought into play in interorganisational arenas through staging. The shaping processes of the entanglement in strategy processes are understood as scriptions, i.e. prescription, inscription or conscription and/or combinations thereof. The noun 'scription' designates these three types and refers to the interaction with scripts, i.e. materiality understood as texts (Panteli and Duncan, 2004). The devices somehow contribute to the staging of arenas for the entanglement into new strategy praxis. Figure 1 shows how the integrative framework is further

developed, bringing especially the staging and the arenas to the foreground. Practitioners and devices entangle with each other, thus staging different arenas.

Figure 1. Extended SAP framework (adapted from Whittington 2006).
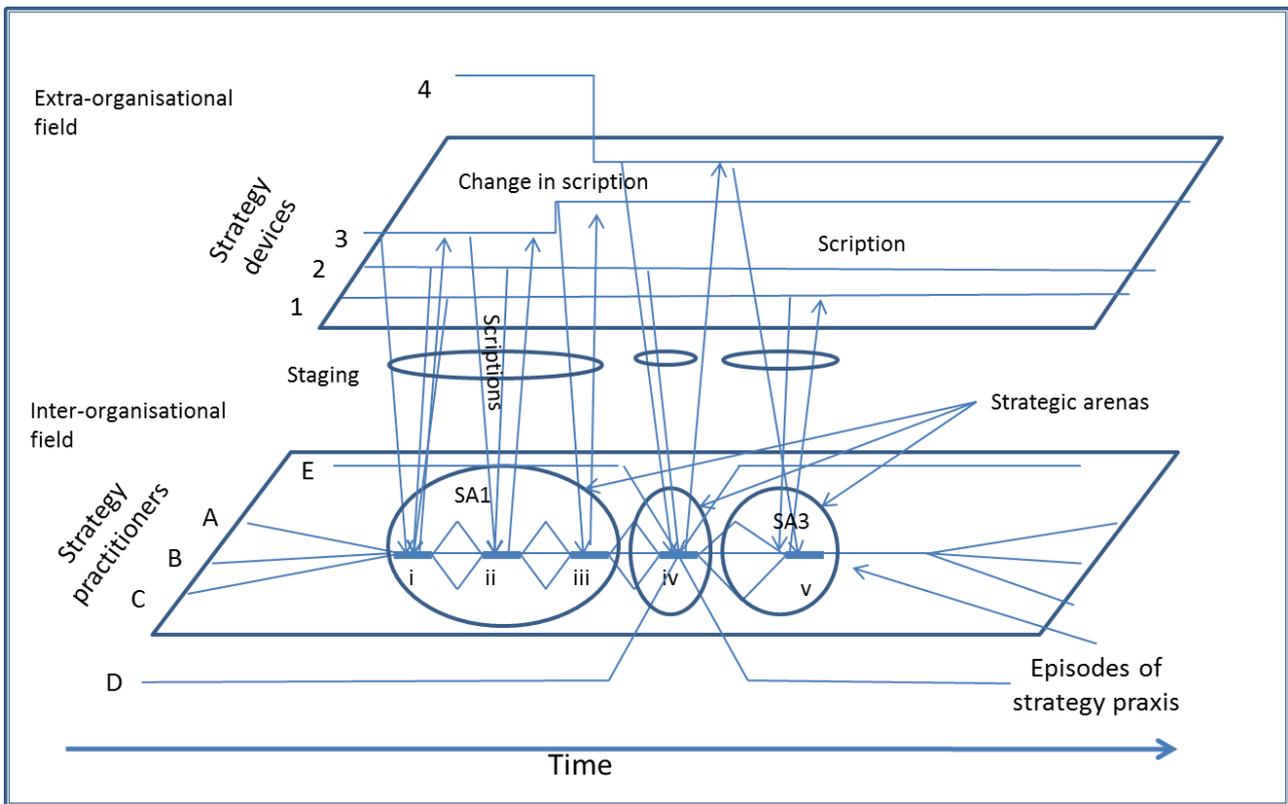
The figure shows, among other things, that strategy arena 1 (SA1) is staged by strategy devices 1, 2 and 3 and strategy practitioners A, B and C. The entanglement of practitioners and strategy devices is staging an arena, creating a special space for strategy work, where (different) practitioners strategise. Strategy arena SA1 could be the middle managers having more strategy meetings (i, ii, iii), preparing a strategy presentation using flipcharts at the first two meetings and a PowerPoint presentation at the third meeting. The flipchart is used in combination with, for example, brainstorming or an 'around-the-table session'. At the fourth meeting, an external consultant and a CEO participate in the strategy discussions, giving their input to the strategy issues presented in PowerPoint. At the fifth meeting, the middle management group finishes the strategy presentation. The strategy devices involve different scriptions. The scriptions take place in the staging of a space, but also by the use of the strategy device.

Finally, we use the arena concept to denote relatively organised, co-located events, thinking of them as front stage events, whereas the processes in between the arenas are understood as back stage events and praxis. Front stage and back stage might be equally important.

Methodology

The paper takes an interpretivist approach (Johnson et al., 2007), adopting a SAP understanding. This is extended by using a sociomaterial understanding of the interplay of devices and practitioners (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008, Pinch 2010). Here, the triple notions of prescription, inscription and conscription (Henderson, 1999; Hutchby, 2001; Latour, 1986) constitute elements for understanding materialisation, which is sought contextualised using the arena and staging concepts (Goffman, 1959; Nordquist, 2012; Van Praet, 2009).

We have chosen a longitudinal single case to gain in-depth, contextual insights (new strategy practitioners and new strategy practices) (Stake, 2005), looking for characteristics to be compared with existing empirical findings and theoretical contributions in the SAP literature. This is supported by Huff et al. who argue that *"especially in times of structural upheaval, more in-depth studies of varied contexts are needed"* (2010:206). The case study relies on ethnography (Johnson et al., 2010).

Multiple methods are used to collect empirical material about the strategy praxis in the case company (Johnson et al., 2007). The data covers a 3-year period with an intensive period of 8 months. More than 35 meetings were observed, 34 interviews carried out and a number of small talks, some in prolongation of the interviews, were recorded. The non-participant observations, interviews with persons as well as groups, and the small talks were all tape recorded. The field notes were registered in a 'log book' to keep intensive track of the process.

Out of this material, three strategy arenas were selected: an early strategy workshop, an open space workshop and a strategy formulation project. The three together cover prescription, inscription and conscription and a range of devices. The identification of devices and analysis of their role are based on the ethnographic presence, but also the direct access to many of the devices, including prescriptive devices, such as plans for workshops and forms for suggestions, and the inscribed devices, such as formulated strategy elements.

We recognise the limitation of our data having been collected with a SAP perspective in mind; the sociomaterial staging perspective being added as a later perspective in a sequential manner (Lewis and Grimes, 1999). Furthermore, there are a few occasional 'gaps in our presence at the various events, implying that in these cases we rely on ex ante and ex post interviews and documents.

The making of strategy in a Danish-based textile company

The case company is a Danish medium-sized textile company. It produces labels, hangtags and packaging, and its primary customer is the clothing industry. The customers are mostly companies selling brands such as Hugo Boss and Puma. Bestseller, a Danish-based multi-brand textile retailer, is the biggest customer. The case company started in 1991 as an entrepreneurial company consisting of the founder, one employee, a good idea and a few customers. The company has developed significantly over the past ten years, from a turnover of 7.4 million euro and 26 employees in 1999 to a turnover of 59.7 million euro and 420 employees in 2011. 105 of the employees work in Denmark, 315 work abroad, and the growth in employees has primarily been abroad. The strategy praxis can be seen as three periods. The first strategy period runs from the inception of the company until 2004 and can be termed 'development by coincidence'. The second strategy period runs from 2004 to 2008 and can be termed 'development by planning' (interview, COO). The third period, and the period from which the three staged strategy arenas are chosen, is termed the 'high involvement process'. There are many strategy activities in the timeline of the strategy process, and the activities are interrelated and have some kind of natural flow. There are many practitioners involved in the many different strategy activities; top management, external consultants, middle management and employees. The activities take place in the period February to October 2009. Here, we focus on the three strategy episodes (Hendry and Siedl, 2003) of strategy formulation in the strategy process, using the concept of staging of strategy arenas.

The first staged arena is a strategy workshop for the top management group. The workshop is facilitated by external consultants, who use familiar as well as new strategy devices. The background for the choice of strategy devices is a wish from the CEO to become part of the strategy process, and not just facilitate the process, as he had done since starting in the company in 2004. The external consultants, who were known in the company, presented how they could drive a strategy process where the management group had to 'work with the strategy in a new way', using

new strategy devices and involving the Danish part of the company in the strategy work. In the second phase, the strategy work is characterised by being very actionable in the sense that the strategy awaydays were used to solve the problems (strategy issues) they had at the moment. And the issues were more or less presented by the CEO. At the strategy workshop, the management group defined the company's strategic challenges, and they were: having a clear strategy, keeping focus on the strategy, conveying the strategy, evaluating and adjusting according to the strategy; the success criteria were that the employees understand and take on the responsibility for the strategy.

The purpose of the first part of the workshop was to develop the strategy content. The corporate strategy was expressed by traditional, measurable strategy standards (developed by the value perform strategy tool). 50% of sales had to come from complete customer solutions, 35% from product sale and 15% from low cost sale (presentations, joint information meeting). Further, the corporate goals were a growth rate of 15% per year, solidity of 30%, revenue of 10% (presentation, start-up meetings) and, lastly, penetration of new markets. The new strategy devices forced the managers to prepare individually before the workshop as they had to fill in a strategy survey and present the results. At the workshop, the managers were forced to explain their answers when they differed significantly.

Using another new strategy device, the second part of the workshop revolved around what to focus on in order to implement the strategy. It was decided to involve both middle managers and employees in the strategy process. By combining strategy content, the strategy challenges and the success criteria, the external consultants came up with three themes to work with at the next strategy activity, the open space workshop. The overall strategic challenges found expression in the following three themes, which are formulated as questions.

1) What can we do to make the customers experience the company as the most complete contractor with special focus on overall solutions and service?
2) What can we do to develop the most competent and responsible organisation in the market?
3) What can we develop to make our projects and customer handling support our work with customers to a considerable extent? (Source: case company).

The second staged strategy arena is an open space strategy workshop based open space principles (Owen, 2008) and the input from the first strategy workshop. The open space strategy workshop, which was facilitated by external consultants, enjoyed participation from top managers, middle

managers and employees. First, the corporate strategy was presented by the CEO, and then the consultant took over and facilitated the strategy workshop by asking the three strategic questions, on the basis of which many inputs (70-100 proposals) were generated. Making the strategy inputs, many groups emerged in each of the three rounds, and a strategy device helped organise the workshop so that each group made a condensation of each of the discussions, containing the following points: Initiator, theme, participants, conclusions and actions to be taken. The condensations were very different, varying according to the different themes, but all groups made some conclusions based on the discussion, and the points varied from a few to many.

At a subsequent meeting, all these contributions were discussed by the management group, assisted by the external consultants. The input was organised around four themes: Customer, learning and growth, processes, and finance. Five projects were organised around the theme customer: Customer analysis, development of sales, knowledge sharing and project management, optimising logistics, and sound business acumen. Two projects were organised around learning and growth: Employee development and integration, and interfaces between Denmark and the local country offices. One project was organised around processes, namely that of restructuring of purchasing. The last project was reduction of stock organised around the theme finance.

The third strategy arena was the strategy project work done based on the work from the open space workshop, where the strategy output became the nine strategy projects.

The nine projects were presented to the employees at a joint information meeting in the middle of April 2009 by the CEO and one consultant, and the employees were asked to prioritise their top three projects (joint information meeting, observation). This prioritisation was used for making the project groups, which were primarily organised around each employee's top priority. At the beginning of May, the project groups were formed, and start-up meetings headed by the CEO and HR manager were held in May. The presentations all followed the same template: PowerPoint presentation (slide presentation, start-up meetings) of the corporate strategy and specific project tasks, followed by an 'around-the-table session' giving each project member the opportunity to share his or her immediate thoughts regarding the challenges of the project. The thoughts of the employees were compiled by the CEO using a flipchart. Each project group worked purposefully to develop a strategy for the project, first by explaining the challenges, then by making an overview of the project tasks and formulating different objectives for overcoming the challenges. They were not expected to come up with a solution to the challenges for the first presentation at the end of June

2009; the task was to develop objectives. At the first presentation to the management group, each project group received the go-ahead to follow some of its objectives and not to others. The overall corporate strategy was presented to all employees at a joint information meeting in the beginning of November and at the local country offices in November.

Most of these strategy projects developed as expected; a strategy was developed, which was then implemented. But one project did not develop as expected; here, the strategy work in the project group took an unexpected turn.

In the next section, the staging of the strategy arenas is analysed and discussed.

Main findings

The following discusses how the strategy arenas are staged, how strategy devices engage and where prescription, inscription and conscription of strategy elements occur. First, we present the identified hard and soft strategy devices used in the three strategy arenas. Second, we analyse the entangled use in each of the staged strategy arenas. Third, we open a cross-cutting discussion of common issues around the devices, the relation front stage/back stage and performers/spectators.

The first staged arena, the strategy workshop with management, showed how the management group by the entangled use of soft and hard strategy devices develops the rough-cut version of the company's corporate strategy. As hard strategy devices, they used a Porterian strategy tool to suggest a combination of three generic strategies. From this suggestion, a balanced scorecard strategy device involving the four perspectives was staged to discuss how to clarify the overall goals of the strategy. Facilitated by consultants at the strategy workshop, the management group entangled with the devices worked out a mission, a vision and a rough-cut corporate strategy inscribed as some traditional, measurable strategy standards, as for example growth rate and revenue.

The hard devices involved prescription in the fashion that the Porterian tool was a survey with questions regarding the three generic strategies, which produced the strategy 'solution'. The prescription also led to an inscription, as managers had to fill in the survey and thereby prepare individually and explain their answers if they diverted from the other answers; this was new

strategy praxis for the management group. The arena was staged deliberately by the CEO, and no conscription occurred.

The second staged arena, the open space workshop, was staged in a manner as to raise questions and issues, thus opening up for employee participation. This was well-received among the employees; they played along through a high level of attendance and the production of a great many proposals. The headquarters employees were, from being spectators, being recast in the roles of active participants, as strategy practitioners. The devices prescribed the use of forms for proposals, and the process led to an extensive inscription of proposals (70-100 filled-out forms). However, the employees followed the prescriptions of the workshop and the forms, and nobody redesigned these devices; therefore no conscription occurred. As an arena, the open space workshop was restricted and controlled, because it took place after management had formulated the main elements in the strategy and before the strategy projects were launched.

The third arena is staging to enable a more detailed design of sub-strategies. The start-up meeting in the strategy groups was about staging the sub-strategy task. The meeting featured the CEO explaining and discussing, intending to inscribe a common view of the strategic challenge and expectations of the project group. This arena was a combination of inscription and prescription of the hard devices used, i.e. PowerPoints were 'presented' and notes were made on flipcharts. But prescription also occurred in this entangled sociomaterial praxis, in the way that the strategy groups knew what was expected of them. The use of strategy groups for working out strategy options and then action plans, choosing project managers among employees and letting the manager be an equal member of the group, staged a strategic arena where strategic discussion was controlled by the group, and the fact that it was difficult for the management to intervene in the discussion can be viewed as a soft device. In this arena, conscription also occurred as a project group articulated taboos. Instead of following the requested guidelines (i.e. the prescriptions) developed in common at the start-up meeting, the group chose to change the strategy task and incorporate (conscribing) the mentioned taboos, deciding that this was important for the strategy to succeed. The soft strategy device used in this episode caused an unexpected impact and performance.

Hard and soft devices are used in all the three staged strategy arenas, and more strategy devices were in play. The soft device 'meeting' is used in all three arenas. Top management was heavily involved in first two strategy arenas, and the middle managers and employees were heavily involved in the second and third strategy arena. Two strategy tools were used to organise and

facilitate the strategy workshop. One strategy tool was based the Porterian strand of thought (Porter, 1985) and a survey, which had to be complete before the workshop. The results of the managers' answers were presented at the workshop, and each manager was to explain her/his answers if they deviated from the group's answers. Having developed a common picture of the strategic situation (based on the strategy tool), another strategy device based on the balanced scorecard thinking was used to 'translate' the strategy to actionable themes by organising the strategic challenges according to the perspectives of the balanced scorecard.

Table 1

Strategy arena	Hard strategy devices	Soft strategy devices	Entangling	Outcome	Practitioners Staging of practitioners
Strategy workshop	Value Perform Balanced Scorecard Flipchart PowerPoint Meeting room	Individual preparation Procedure for workshop Meetings	Prescription of Value perform and BSC Inscription of strategy elements in new BSC	Target-setting Making rough-cut corporate strategy	CEO Management group External consultants
Open space workshop	PowerPoint presentation of corporate strategy Strategy template Company canteen and meeting rooms	Presentation Open space principles Procedure for workshop Meetings Group work	Prescription after open space and strategy template Inscription of input	Getting input to the strategic issues Involvement and commitment to the strategy	Management group External consultants Middle management Employees
Project work in groups	PowerPoint presentation of the corporate strategy Flipchart	Presentation 'Around-the-table session' Procedure for group work	Combined prescription and inscription Prescription of 'expected' outcome	Involvement and commitment to the strategy Making sub-strategies and action plans	Management group Middle management Employees

	Agendas Different meeting rooms	Meetings	Conscription by changing the strategy task		

It is possible to trace a series of staged arenas that leads from early top management meetings to the open space workshop and further to the strategy projects – a materialisation of results – even through implementation – is occurring. This passing in time is an emerging set of events. A number of hard and soft devices are used during the strategy formulation, prescribing and inscribing, and occasionally conscribing, formulated strategy elements. The first two arenas show inscription and prescription, but no conscription. Conscription, however, is identified in the third strategic arena, but still management (primarily the CEO) performs some kind of normative control of most strategy projects, even with the one taking an unexpected turn. This is related to the entangled use of soft and hard devices, especially the soft device 'around the table' in combination with the hard device flipchart. This entangled activity was done in all project groups, and the outcome of this is traced from the start-up meetings to the last strategy presentation. The SAP framework is here suitable for separating and dissecting the strategy activities into strategy devices and strategy practitioners, and at the same time, it shows how they are entangled. Further, it is possible to analyse how strategy devices are intersecting with the staging of different arenas.

In a number of occasions, it appears that the devices are supporting the tactics of the management and the consultants in the process, with the exception of the project group raising controversial issues, which had been silenced. Moreover, management appears to swiftly orchestrate front and back stage aspects of the three arenas, opening and closing for employee participation and solidifying the preliminary results of the strategy process. As such, strategy devices, including the workshops and the meetings, also enable the positioning of central performers, such as the CEO, as well as spectators, such as the employees abroad. This result is somewhat in contradiction with other strategy researchers who are critical of the outcome of strategy workshops (Jarrett and Stiles, 2010; Johnson et al., 2010) and/or view the workshop process as delicate and political (Räisänen et al., 2013). Characterising this particular strategy context is that it has a relatively stable power constellation amongst its managers and between managers and employees.

The three strategy arenas analysed above are, as front stages, glued together by back stage activities. Through these, the first arena's rough-cut strategy is translated into the open space workshop's suggestions and further to the project group tasks in the third arena. In the first back stage event, the strategic challenges identified were translated by the management group and the consultants into three strategic questions fitted to contribute to the staging of the open space workshop. In the second back stage process, the many open space proposals were translated into the project group tasks.

It is important to note how the staging involves construction of performers and spectators. The headquarters management, and especially the CEO, is frequently acting as the main performer (see also Van Praet, 2009), whereas headquarters employees commence as spectators and are staged into strategy practitioners in the second and third arena. On the other hand, the subsidiary employees abroad, the vast majority, are staged as distant spectators; at one occasion, they are even staged as scapegoats.

Conclusion

This article has examined how strategy arenas are staged through the entanglement of sociomaterial practices and strategy practitioners. The strategy formulation involves prescribing, inscribing and conscribing of strategy devices. The purpose was to identify enabling and constraining aspects of employing materiality/devices. To analyse the dynamics between devices and the staging of arenas, the paper develops a framework of understanding drawing on a broader SAP approach, extended with sociomateriality concepts of materialising, devices and staging, and three types of scription. We investigated what types of devices were used to shape the strategy praxis, including staging its arenas, focusing on three arenas: an early strategy workshop, an open space workshop and a strategy sub-project that developed in an unexpected manner. The strategy workshop was staged as a traditional meeting with the management group in a closed formal arena, in which strategy was done by inscribing the strategic challenges to the rough-cut corporate strategy. The open space workshop was staged as a participatory event, recasting the employees as strategy practitioners inscribing a series of proposals into the strategy formulation. The unexpected events exhibit a conscription of the strategy formulation, as participants break out of the pregiven staged frame and develop a renewing contribution. The formulation is, however, harboured/contained by the CEO.

As such, the strategy formulation emerges as a process of assembling and entangling a bundle of devices and praxises. In a number of occasions, the devices are brought to support management's and consultants' tactics in the process, with the exception of the project group voicing taboos. Moreover, management appears to swiftly orchestrate front and back stage aspects of the three arenas, opening and closing for employee participation and solidifying the preliminary results of the strategy process. As such, strategy devices also enable the positioning of central performers, such as the CEO, and spectators, such as the employees abroad. Along with Latour, we therefore *do* contend that strategy processes involve arenas for things, as things are taken to mean quasi objects entangling the social and the material.

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