'NETWORKING' A EUROPEAN COMMUNITY: THE CASE OF A EUROPEAN COMMISSION EGOVERNMENT INITIATIVE

Complete Research

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Abstract

Terms such as Network Society or Information Society have gained enormous importance within European policy work and the European Commission's aim to create and stabilise a European Union or European Community which is innovative and inclusive. Indeed many governments see their responsibility in ensuring the inclusion of the regions they represent in a 'Networked Society', and in doing so, ensuring some control over the transformation process. In this process the 'Networked Society' becomes a prescriptive concept that designates a desirable objective: A space for 'making' Europe by connecting multiple actors.

This paper considers critically the limits of the Network Society-concept for researching the very phenomena it sets out to describe. The paper is based on a 3-year ethnographic study of a European Commission initiative to create a European community of practitioners working in the field of eGovernment. The paper attends to material-discursive practices associated with sharing approaches that support and disrupt the making of an 'interconnected Europe' and a 'European Information Society'. The paper provides evidence that such practices do not link and reconfigure independently existing entities, but rather that subject and objects come to be produced within and through such association.

Keywords: Network Society; Information Society; Europe; eGovernment; European Commission; social networking; community of practice; agential realism; material-discursive practices

1 Introduction[1]

The term Network Society has received enormous attention within the broader discourse of globalisation and the advancements of information and communication technologies (ICTs). One of the key aspects of the notion of the 'Network Society' is its boundary-spanning nature, its ability to connect distant actors. Kallinikos (2003) argues that the notion of networks has become so significant because it challenges the '*boundary-maintaining* practices of modern organizations' (p.1, emphasis in original) such as formal organisations or markets. This transcending and bridging of boundaries is associated

with the expectations of the great opportunities that may arise out of network connections. Many scholars believe that ICT-enabled networks are 'reshaping social relations' (Latham and Sassen, 2005) and in doing so produce new social spaces.

The term network is employed in multiple ways across academia and beyond and it is important to consider the different ways in which 'networks' are used, if wanting to understand such phenomena. Knox et al. (2006) find that the term network is used as method, metaphor and form. A result of this ambivalent usage is that the term Network Society is not just employed as an analytical concept but also a prescriptive term that informs imaginaries about interconnected societies.

In particular within European policy and administrative discourses has the network metaphor received tremendous importance. Barry (2001) argues that the terms 'network' and 'connect' have become 'the key metaphor for the European political project' (p.27) and play 'a central part in European political imagination' (p.20).[2] For example the former Directorate General of the European Commission DG INFSO (DG Information Society and Media) is now called DG CONNECT (DG Communications Networks, Content and Technology); in 2014 the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA) started its work to 'promote growths, jobs and competitiveness'[3].

Not surprisingly speaks Manuel Castells of the European Union as a 'network state' and describes the public sector in general as 'the decisive actor to develop and shape the network society' (2006, p.17). Yet, Barry (2001) argues that Castells' view is a rather functionalist account of Europe. It confuses the ambivalent usages of the term network which too easily and routinely 'criss-cross the distinction between the technical and the social [...] Technical connections, it is thought, form social networks; social connections are established technically' (p.14). In addition, Barry (2001) claims that Castells' account 'obscures the critical role of networks in European political life' (p.27).

> Europe is not a network state. But the European Union is a political institution in which the model of the network has come to provide a dominant sense of political possibility (p.102).

What is important to acknowledge is that discourses about 'networks' and 'connections' are not value neutral but political and performative:

> Networks do not so much reflect social, political and technological reality; they provide a diagram on the basis of which reality might be refashioned and reimagined: they are the models of the political future' (Barry 2001, p.87).

From an agential realist perspective (Barad, 2007; Orlikowski and Scott, 2014) do networks not only afford the refashioning or reimagining of reality, but may be conceptualised as effects of material-discursive practices which configure social realities and produce particular enactments of the world. Barad (2003) argues that such 'discursive practices are not human-based activities but rather specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted' (p.828). Hence, if a Network Society is understood as an assemblage of material-discursive practices, it is of utmost importance to understand how it performs public spheres, how it opens up new public spaces and what the performative conditions are under which the network metaphor is being used and enacted.

This paper looks at a European Commission initiative for connecting people through sharing approaches. This is particularly relevant because a new wave of network metaphors came to be intro-

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[2] On a national level Boucas (2008) discusses how European policy discourses about the Information Society are being enacted differently and demonstrates his argument with the example of Greece.

[3] http://inea.ec.europa.eu/en/about_us/

duced in public discourse through 'social networking technologies' (or Web 2.0). Hence new material-discursive practices have emerged that reconfigure the ways in which Europe is assembled decisively.

This paper is based on a 3-year ethnographic study of a European 'social network' of practitioners working in the field of eGovernment: ePractice. The project was initiated, financed and coordinated by the European Commission and forms part of the European Commission's striving to support the further advancement of a 'European Information Society' (European Commission, 2005a). In particular ePractice aimed to enhance the learning and sharing of eGovernment-related practices across a 'European eGovernment community' by making use of 'social networking' technologies.

Taking these considerations as a starting point a leading question for this paper is hence: *How and to what extent do material-discursive practice—associated with sharing approaches to open government—support or disrupt policy discourse concerning the 'Network Society' and an 'interconnected Europe'?*

The paper is structured in the following way: Firstly a literature review situates the considerations above in a discussion about how an interconnected Europe is being 'made'. It follows a review for a theoretical framework of how material-discursive practices associated with 'networking' and 'networks' facilitate our understanding of the European Commission's endeavour for shaping the advancements of a Networked Society. A vignette will present and analyse the findings from the ethnographic fieldwork. Finally a discussion and a conclusion section will draw the arguments together.

2 Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Networking Europe: On the 'making' of Europe

Europe, as a European *Union,* as a European *Community,* is a vision and objective shared by many Europeans, be it citizens, civil servants or politicians. The European Community is the most important part or 'pillar' of the European Union. Europe is defined differently across Europe: in terms of its geography, history, culture, languages, and religion: Does Turkey belong to Europe? Europe is done differently across Europe: The Greeks do Europe very differently to the Germans. But so do the Italians, Spanish, or Irish. The British sometimes say they go on holidays to Europe when visiting the continent (thereby implying the British Isles are not really Europe). There is also the administrative and legislative Europe that seeks to implement the political and economic union of its 28 member states. Biebuyck and Rumford (2012) argued to think of Europe as a 'multiplicity':

> Europe is real, but is also produced in multiples. And while Europe 'does a lot', so to speak, there is no singularity to it as a political or cultural form (p.4).

They argue that Europe 'lacks an essence or centre', that it is made, composed and reconfigured in 'particular temporal and spatial settings' (p.5) through 'many meanings, practices, strategies and subjects' (ibid). For example Claire Waterton (2002) discusses how the creation of a European biotopes classification database is 'a simultaneous "building" of Europe' (p.178) connected to the 'fantasy of a world united by information' (ibid). Biebuyck and Rumford (2012) point to an emerging and critical literature that explores 'the ways Europe is "made up" of contingent practices of representation, narration, inscription, and performance' (p.6). Different European imaginaries may be found around Europe which are often 'technical, bureaucratic and vernacular in composition' (p.6). In line with these claims, Barry (2001) points out that

> [t]he process of what political scientists call European integration has been a technological one. And technology plays a central part in the European political imagination. To understand the political make-up of Europe one must attend not just to the study of formal political institutions and their interrelations, although these are important. One must also address the multitude of devices and instruments which populate the continent, and which figure in European political discourse. The politics of Europe today is, in many respects, a politics of technology. Europe it-

self is a technological arrangement. The effects that the European Union has in Europe and beyond are an emergent consequence of this arrangement (p.20).

Over a decade later this statement still holds. It is through networking that Europe 'can be drawn together without any direct imposition of an order but through a steady process of reordering' (Barry, 2002, p.147). Importantly, Barry (2001) argues against 'drawing a line between the social and the technical' but instead argues to analyse '*arrangements*: of artefacts, practices and techniques, instruments, language and bodies' (p.11, emphasis in original). The European Commission initiative presented in this paper is just one example of how Europe as a 'technological arrangement' is produced through technical inscriptions and the association of distant actors. It contributes to previous research as ePractice specifically makes use of so-called 'social networking technologies' (which highlight the networking metaphor even further by emphasising the connectivity of social actors through technical means).

Through a range of instruments such as action plans, funding schemes, work plans, policy documents, contributes the European Commission to the (re)ordering of Europe and towards European integration. Andrew Barry (2001) was one of the first to speak of European policies as technical *and* political; and pointed out that technology may be seen to enable Europeans to connect across national boundaries and institutions. In doing so, European policy does not follow a hierarchy established by local, regional or national governmental action but cuts across.

> Technology is expected to forge connections across and establish boundaries around an empire, a firm or a nation-state. If the territorial boundaries of states are generally fixed, zones of technological circulation are not. In these circumstances, the question of how technological zones can be established and regulated is reckoned to be of enormous political and economic importance (Barry 2001, p.25).

Technology connects across established (country) boundaries, the network that unfolds cuts across borders and can be identified as something European; a *European network* while containing only a limited number of elements, it is much more entangled and situated in the local than European countries themselves (cf. Barry 2002, p.153). The question of how 'technological zones' may get a established and regulated is a key concern of this paper in terms of the material-discursive practices that produce a European eGovernment community: Through the employment of social networking technologies aims the European Commission to facilitate and further community building, as will be demonstrated in the vignette below.

What Barry describes as the promise of technology and an urge to connect within Europe, have Green et al. (2005) called 'the imperative to connect'. They argue that technologies are employed in 'political place-making projects' (p.806). While connecting disparate and perhaps unrelated places (or people) throughout Europe, these connections form a digital space in which Europe is being produced. They report an 'explicit and ongoing enthusiasm [within the EU] for investment in them [ICTs] as place-building technologies' (ibid). Through such connections 'communication and interaction at a distance' (ibid) is made possible. This ordering suggests that Europe is enacted and produced through the performance of initiatives such as ePractice.

The Network Society has become a prescriptive term and desirable objective. It conveys the—often political ambition—to do something 'good' for society. For example, Castells (2004) speaks of 'a common belief in the power of networking and of the synergy obtained by giving to others and receiving from others' (p.40). It is not simply providing access to information sources that the European Commission aims to achieve through its adoption and usage of phrases such as Information Society but rather by providing access to individuals the EU claims to enable 'social connection and social transformation' (Green et al. 2005, p.809). For example, the Lisbon Strategy aims to address challenges such as globalisation and ageing through knowledge and innovation which are seen to be the key pillars of Europe's success (Rodrigues, 2006, p.405). The concept of the Network Society was so

well received that it not merely describes but further contributes and produces the effects it purports to depict. Knox et al. (2006) argue that

> [w]e have come to realize that networks are not neutral tools for describing social life, but rather entail a particular politics in their description of social life as fluid and contingent (p.135).

This political dimension of networks becomes apparent in considerations about a 'digital divide' that led many regional and national governments as well as international bodies such as the EU to implement initiatives that ensure that 'the specific regions they represented in this new world were not left behind and to gain some control over the transformation' (Green et al. 2005, p.807).

2.2 'Intra-acting' Europe

Castells (2006) describes technology as 'a necessary, albeit not sufficient condition for the emergence of a new form of social organization based on networking, that is on the diffusion of networking in all realms of activity on the basis of digital communication networks' (p.3). Barry (2006) responds that the concept of 'Network Society' makes the 'mistake to replace a structural sociology of national societies with a structural sociology of global networks' (p.243). Castells (2006) definition supports this claim:

> The network society, in the simplest terms, is a social structure based on networks operated by information and communication technologies based in microelectronics and digital computer networks that generate, process, and distribute information on the basis of the knowledge accumulated in the nodes of the networks (p.7).

Latour (2011) argued vividly against this framing of society at a workshop convened by Manuel Castells: Latour stressed not to take conventional notions of society as superior phenomena and individuals as social atoms as if these atoms are "self-contained entities *deprived of all the other entities* necessary for their subsistence" (p.806, emphasis in original). In contrast he argues that any actor must be understood as an actor-network (for example 'individuals' are always already children, parents, friends, colleagues). Hence the distinction between individuals and society is an artificial one.

> To believe in the existence either of individual or of society is simply a way to say that we have been deprived of information on the individuals we started with (Latour 2011, p.805).

Hence a Network Society cannot be conceptualised as simply connecting individuals. Rather actors come to be produced through association. For example Barbara Czarniawska (2004) has pointed to the performative aspect of actors. She argues that instead of assuming 'actors who make contact', it is in contrast 'that connections between actions produce actors' (p.781). Similarly Barad (2007) argues that her approach to agential realism

> [...] does not take the boundaries of any of the objects or subjects of [...] studies for granted but rather investigates the material-discursive boundary-making practices that produce "objects" and "subjects" and other differences out of, and in terms of, a changing relationality (p.93).

Within Information Systems Research has this perspective been promoted most prominently by Lucy Suchman (e.g. 2007), and Wanda Orlikowski and Susann Scott (e.g. 2008, 2014). The notion of 'intra-action' that Barad coined does not just acknowledge the interaction and relational effects of network actors but emphasises the fact that they do not pre-exist their 'intra-action' as independent entities (p.33). Hence it is important to realise that not only does a connection need to be created, but that what is being connected is being produced simultaneously. A network does not connect independent, hence pre-existing entities, but it produces and configures them. It is important to understand that actors are 'made to be' (Mol, 2010, p.255). This does not only apply to non-human actors, but to human actors as well. Gherardi (2000) points out:

> If entities (human or non-human) achieve their form as a consequence of the relations in which they are located, and if relations do not hold fast by themselves, then they have to be performed in, by and through those relations (p.218).

Hence no thing can be *reduced* to something else; nor do actors pre-exist their performance in associations. As Callon (1999) argued it is not about 'a network connecting entities which are already there, but a network which configures ontologies' (p.185): Connections produce actors and so does a Network Society.

3 Case study and methodology

3.1 ePractice

This paper is based on a 3-year ethnographic study of ePractice: a European Commission project to connect European eGovernment[4] practitioners. Building an ePractice network is part of the bigger aim of building a European Community, of *making* Europe. It is situated in an environment that strives to create, nurture and foster a European Union and European Community. In June 2007 ePractice joined-up a number of legacy projects and the European Commission aimed to establish it as *the* European meeting place for eGovernment practitioners. Practitioners work either as civil servants at different governmental levels throughout Europe (some involved in IT project management, others in programme management or at policy making level); academics or consultants all engaged across a whole range of eGovernment topics or practices (such as eProcurement, eGovernment benchmarking, eParticipation).

In building and fostering a 'European eGovernment community, the aim of ePractice was to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience amongst eGovernment practitioners across Europe. This was meant to be achieved through a Web portal comprising a number of online and offline measures. In January 2012 over 140,000 people had registered as members to ePractice, over 1,550 case studies had been submitted, and over 1,800 events had been announced.

With an initial user base of just under 5,000 individuals ePractice grew exponentially throughout the period of my fieldwork. The service is free of charge. Via ePractice users are able to set up a profile, connect with others, describe their projects as 'ePractice good practice cases', participate in theme-based communities, communicate and discuss via a blog, disseminate studies, activities and events; and also receive up-to-date information about eGovernment across Europe. Furthermore there exists the opportunity to participate in eGovernment related workshops and conferences. These workshops provide a more formal place for coming together in form of working sessions, but also leave considerable room for more informal coffee break interaction.

3.2 Methodology

Ethnographic methods are particularly well-suited to investigate complex arrangements (Barry 2001). In particular those that focus on practices. Such a *praxiographic approach* follows how objects are being enacted in practice rather than how objects are being interpreted by participants:

> So, the emphasis shifts. Instead of the observer's eyes, the practitioner's hands become the focus point of theorizing (Mol, 2003, p.151).

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[4] eGovernment (or electronic government) is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) within public sector organisations in order to provide electronic services to citizens, businesses, and to other public sector organisations. The objective of eGovernment initiatives can be described as either using ICT to improve service delivery and make it more effective or using ICT in order to make service delivery more efficient.

For the research this paper presents, these considerations suggest researching the material-discursive practices through which a 'Networked Europe' is being enacted: To attend to the practices (and processes) of relating and connecting; to the work performed in net*works* to make connections and the subject- and object-positions that are subsequently produced. Accordingly my research methodology can be described as a process-oriented and practice-based study.

3.3 Research involvement

My involvement with ePractice spanned over a period of 3 years; this included a 1 year in-depth study of the Thematic Network eGovMeasureNet[5] which was related to eGovernment benchmarking and measurements. I conducted a total of 73 semi-structured interviews with 58 interviewees. Regarding the selection of interviewees I followed two different strategies.

1) For the ePractice team which consists of the project officers from the European Commission and a consortium of managing consultants I interviewed all relevant stakeholders. I interviewed most of these stakeholders several times in order to capture their (changing) perception of ePractice over time.

2) Concerning the eGovernment practitioners: I met most of my interviewees at eGovernment related workshops or was introduced to them by other practitioners. I furthermore interviewed particularly active users of the ePractice Web portal.

In addition I attended 23 events out of which 15 were ePractice workshops and five were events conducted by eGovMeasureNet. My involvement was not restricted to workshops and conferences only but also stretched to the online presence of ePractice. The roles I performed during the research ranged from participant observer to workshop rapporteur to member of an Informal Expert Committee to community presenter to project staff of eGovMeasureNet and community facilitator for eGovMeasureNet on ePractice.

The data that I will present in the following is derived from interviews (foremostly with ePractice team members). They reflect my interviewees concerns with their task to nurture and foster a European eGovernment community by promoting and relying heavily on social networking technologies.

4   Vignette: Networking a European eGovernment community

At the time of my fieldwork (2007-2010) the European Commission had put in place several initiatives to support and further the development of eGovernment in Europe. Its eGovernment Action Plan (cf. European Commission 2006) comprised five major objectives in order to contribute to the i2010 initiative for jobs and growth in the Information Society (cf. European Commission 2005a) and ultimately to the Lisbon Strategy which set out to make Europe 'the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (European Commission 2000). The central idea was to renew Europe's economic basis by 'focussing on knowledge and innovation' (Rodrigues 2005). In a mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy in 2004 an expert group found several flaws. Amongst others: blurred strategic objectives and a lack of implementation, coordination and participation mechanism (Rodrigues 2005). The objectives were then revised and 'major political priorities' selected. Amongst these: 'To facilitate all forms of innovation', and 'to facilitate the spread and effective use of ICT and to build a fully inclusive information society' (European Commission 2005b).

Activities to pursue these objectives were defined in the eGovernment Action Plan (European Commission, 2006) and acknowledged that most challenges to their fulfilment were to be found at national

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[5] 'Thematic Networks' were a funding scheme under the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme (CIP) of the European Commission. The name of the Thematic Network has been disguised, and so have been the names of my interviewees.

or sub-national level, and identified its own role in supporting member states with two types of activities: *measuring* and *sharing*. What was aspired was the 'integration and sharing of processes and knowledge across departments and institutions' (European Commission 2003, p.19). The eGovernment Action plan stated that the need 'for greater sharing of experience is widely recognised' (ibid) and aimed to facilitate sharing through different mechanisms that had been put in place such as the eGovernment Good Practice Framework or the eGovernment Observatory. Both initiatives were launched by the European Commission in June 2005. In June 2007 these two initiatives were joined within ePractice.

The eGovernment Good Practice Framework (eGGPF) was an Internet portal to exchange good practice cases within the field of eGovernment. A very prominent feature was the 'good practice database' which was a collection of 'well-defined eGovernment cases'. These 'good practice cases' were case studies of eGovernment projects describing, for example, their objectives, technological and management approach, their political and legal context, and providing resources in the form of project documentation or software packages. The eGGPF aimed 'to facilitate the exchange of good practices, their transfer when appropriate and learning from experiences at local, regional, national, European and international level' (European Commission, 2007). By the end of March 2007, shortly before the project's termination, 1,396 practitioners had signed up. Registered users could set up their profile and participate in forums, they received a monthly newsletter, could post eGovernment events and news, and could submit their 'good practice cases' to the database. 301 'good practice cases' were stored in the database and awaited users to browse them. Exceptional cases were highlighted through the 'good practice label'.

In 2007 ePractice set out to harmonise and coordinate eGovernment activities throughout Europe. It integrated the existing registered members and the case database, and was established as a platform to promote and enable the *sharing* of eGovernment knowledge and expertise across Europe. Yet whereas the eGGPF was meant to develop a 'good practice case database', ePractice aimed to develop a 'brand and culture of sharing' (ePractice.eu 2007).

After the termination of the eGovernment Good Practice Framework I met with its project manager Hans in Berlin. Hans explained that social networking or Web 2.0 was 'the direction in which the development goes'. He claimed that top-down knowledge transfer was not a viable or successful solution and that instead what was needed was to build a community in which the members were 'networked':

> If you just pour in content at the head and hope that it comes out, you'll have reached far less than if you really build a network.
>
> > Hans, eGovernment Good Practice Framework project manager (04/2005-03/2007),
> > consulting firm ITforEurope, June 2007.

Yet he emphasised that network building was a 'special challenge if you approach the European frame' not only due to cultural diversity and multilingualism but also due to very 'different starting prerequisites'. His hope was that the less-advanced countries could learn a lot from the more mature ones across Europe. With respect to the eGGPF Jorge (ePractice project manager, eLearningEurope) stated

> ITforEurope[6] focussed a lot on the cases, if they are fine and good and thorough. But this is a very academic point of view. And I think you spend all your efforts on the cases. And I think you should rather focus on the people.

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[6] ITforEurope was the consultancy leading the framework contract for the eGGPF.

<div align="right">Jorge, ePractice project manager (04/2007-03/2009),
consulting firm eLearningEurope, July 2007.</div>

Similarly Victor (European Commission project officer) stated that the European Commission had been 'too naïve about the cases' and that, rather than collecting cases in a database, what should be aimed for is 'to reach the people'. Subsequently 'ePractice good practice cases' came to be seen as extensions of practitioners' CVs (Jorge), as a 'type of experience' that shares 'thoughts and mistakes' (e.g. Knut, Roger). Interviewees, policy documents as well as ePractice documentation emphasised ePractice's role to become 'an interactive initiative that empowers its users to discuss and influence open government, policy-making and the way public administrations operate and deliver services' (ePractice.eu 2007).

Pivotal to the design of ePractice was the emerging use of social network technologies. The wide-spread adaptation of Social Networking (or Web 2.0) paradigms and technologies in the public sector had caused much enthusiasm towards *Government 2.0* in order to overcome some of the shortcomings associated and experienced in the realm of eGovernment initiatives and policies. Government 2.0 promised to enable user-driven projects rather than government initiated. A new mode of production for innovative eGovernment applications was being sought (Ahn, 2012). The general aim was to enhance transparency rather than efficiency (ePractice.eu 2009, p.9). ePractice is one example of a public sector initiative that was set-up as a Government 2.0 project in that it aimed to provide a space that is community (or user)-driven and—in doing so—enabling a new form of cross-agency, cross-country collaboration and knowledge exchange.

> They [the initiators] took a risk when they started because at that time Web 2.0 was just a trend. It was not a reality as it is now and everybody uses it. So it was a risk that they took, it could have been a failure because it could have happened that with time people just use Web 2.0 in things like Facebook [...]. I mean, a topic like eGovernment that is—I wouldn't say that is a sexy topic—it's not because it's not interesting but because it's very specialised and very technical. So putting Web 2.0 technology on the service of this topic, I think it was really, really risky. And it turned out to be a success because now—first Web 2.0 is a reality that everyone uses, and second ePractice became a leader and an example for many, many, many other portals run by many other organisations of what a good practice exchange portal using Web 2.0 technology should be.

<div align="right">Luis, ePractice project officer (01/08-12/09),
European Commission, November 2008.</div>

Hence in contrast to preceding projects, was ePractice meant to create a network connecting 'eGovernment practitioners' and not eGovernment projects or 'eGovernment case studies'. In our first interview Knut, the European Commission project officer that instigated ePractice, said that '[i]t was felt that there were communities out there related to eGovernment'. Subsequently the term community or 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) was used to mobilise and enrol people throughout Europe working on eGovernment as practitioners by suggesting that they shared a work practice. Knut also believed that the shift was expressed in the diffusion of offline and online parts of the portal. Many people involved in ePractice labelled this as a 'paradigm shift'. In contrast to previous initiatives was the aim for ePractice to set-up a 'social network'. What was meant by 'paradigm shift' was that, rather than establishing knowledge sharing around 'ePractice good practice cases' as the eGGPF did, knowledge sharing in ePractice was based around individual practitioners. It was argued that what had to be connected in a 'network' were practitioners—and not like in traditional approaches databases or case studies. In an 'old paradigm' knowledge sharing was meant to be accomplished through an online case study database; the new paradigm's aim was to 'focus on people' (Jorge, ePractice project manager), it aimed to 'reach the people' (Jorge).

Another shift concerned the role the European Commission saw itself in. Whereas for the eGGPF the Commission had assumed a role as provider, it now shifted towards facilitator. For example Victor stated:

> The EC is a facilitator but it is up to the community members to get in touch and contact other members. […] The European Commission is starting the process of building the community and then expects the practitioners to work on their own.

> Victor, co-initiator of ePractice and project officer (04/2007-12/2009), EC DG Informatics, June 2007.

Overall it was felt that after some time the portal was 'belonging to the users, not us' (Luis, November 2008) as 'they put cases, they put news, they put events, they put everything'. He cited the 'latest statistics' to account for the 'amazing increase in users' activities'. This view very much describes the European Commission's networking activities as 'connecting' eGovernment practitioners who are 'out there' waiting to be collected and connected. Through such connections it was expected that 'synergies' will be realised. The role of the European Commission was that of an 'infrastructure provider' as it was believed that the eGovernment practitioners themselves take ownership of their 'social relations'. This view and 'shift in paradigm' resonated with the general emphasis on 'social networking' or 'network' metaphors. Knut stated:

> I think it becomes more and more common in Europe: You get nowhere without a wide European network.

> Knut, European Commission, ePractice project officer, August 2007.

Similarly one of my interviewees described his network practices in the following way.

> I'm using it [ePractice] as a part of my professional networking, and also disseminating, professional dissemination of work. I also connect with other experts in the area, although there are other networks and often you can see that you are connecting with the same people through different networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and so on.

> Marko, Slovenian eGovernment NGO, November 2010.

Subsequently was ePractice developed as a platform 'to connect' by promoting and enabling the *sharing* of eGovernment knowledge and expertise across Europe. The slogan of ePractice was: meet, share and learn. Victor explained the idea behind the slogan at the start of ePractice in the following way:

> Meet at the portal or workshops, and then you learn from the experience from others, and then at the end you are supposed to contribute and then you share your own experience.

> Victor, co-initiator of ePractice and project officer (04/2007-12/2009), EC DG Informatics, June 2007.

High expectations of this new way of facilitating sharing in eGovernment were not only expressed by European Commission officials but also by practitioners themselves. Brian, a project manager in UK local government, stated shortly after the start of ePractice:

> The existing framework was of no use whatsoever. Giving a list of cases in education or health, it didn't take account in any case of whether it was capable of getting replicated or not. But I think the new best practice framework will take that into account. That something only becomes a best practice if you can show that what you've done is transferable in some way.

> Brian, civil servant, UK local government, June 2007.

The shift in providing a learning space for eGovernment in Europe was conceived as a shift in what counts as 'best practice'. Brian emphasised a shift towards transferability and a capability 'of getting replicated'. The significance that was attributed to 'transferability' was prominent and repeatedly oc-

curred during my interviews. It reiterated the importance of circulation within a space that Barry labels 'technological zone'. Here individual or organisational practices became 'European good practices'. Through such circulations individual ePractice members became associated as 'European eGovernment practitioners'. This was further supported through initiatives such as the European eGovernment awards (a competition for European 'best practice') or a related 'public vote' during which ePractice users voted for their favourite 'European good practice case'. Knut was very enthusiastic about the potential benefits of such connections throughout Europe:

> There are synergies waiting to happen. There are things which can happen from that community and there are community members that do not know what there is actually out there. […] The vision is that we will make this community much more focused in terms of the common value of the European dimensions of eGovernment – that they realise what the value is of having this kind of an international framework to their daily life in trying to improve public service.

> Knut, ePractice project officer (04/2007-12/2007)
> European Commission, August 2007.

Knut provided a rationale for opening a European dimension to ePractice users. This dimension opens up through connecting individuals and providing a framework (or space) in which Europe can unfold. ePractice was one example, the biannual European eGovernment awards another. Social networking technologies were seen as an infrastructure enabling connections:

> One thing is to have the functionality and another that people really use it—so we have to identify key people.

> Jorge, ePractice project manager (04/2007-03/2009),
> consulting firm eLearningEurope, July 2007.

Those 'key people' were the ones that were supposed to constitute a European community. ePractice had to provide the basic functionality and once this was created people could 'get to work'. The identification of key people was seen to be best accomplished within existing networks as stated, for example, in the *Good Practice Exchange memorandum* between the European Commission and the Consortium around Consulting Firm eLearningEurope:

> When targeting the community of practitioners we should anchor the portal in existing communities of practice (ePractice.eu 2007, p.2).

Introducing a 'social network' (or any association) is never done into an 'empty world' (Mol 2010, p.259). Rather it has to compete with other national and international associations, with other online forums, knowledge repositories etc. In order to successfully establish a European ePractice eGovernment community, linkages between individuals working on eGovernment, eGovernment projects and initiatives, and public sector organisations need to be knit and, to some extent, replace existing connections. A 'social network' can become strong only by associations that are knit in favourable ways. It is a multiplicity of connections and relations that produce and reproduce actors through their continuous reconfiguration.

5   Discussion

ePractice may be framed as a 'technological zone' (Barry 2001, 2006), as a European initiative which followed the 'strategic imperative' to develop a technological zone (2001, p.244). Core to ePractice was an 'imperative to connect' (Green et al. 2005) a diverse set of actors (eGovernment practitioners and eGovernment 'good practice cases' alike) which was much more prominent than within its predecessor projects. European Commission officials as well as sub-contracted management consultants affirmed these statements when referring to a profound 'paradigm shift' towards a 'social network'-approach. This 'paradigm shift' which interviewees referred to repeatedly was based on a number of assumptions: (1) It was felt that there was 'a community out there'; (2) 'Social networking technolo-

gies' and the Web 2.0 approach became increasingly important and pervasive; (3) They offered the possibility of engaging with 'the' community in a 'structured and appealing way'.

Such considerations approve of Castells' (2004) observation of 'a common belief in the power of networking and of the synergy obtained by giving to others and receiving from others' (p.40). The vignette demonstrated how initiatives such as ePractice subscribe to the potential benefits of networking for knowledge sharing and resulting synergies. For example, Knut stressed that there were 'synergies waiting to happen' through the exchange of 'good practices'.

Triggered by these positive assumptions of networking and related benefits to a (European) society, this paper was interested in how particular practices—associated with sharing approaches—support or disrupt policy discourse on a European Information Society and an 'interconnected Europe'. Barry (2001) had argued that

> [t]he "macro" political order of the state is built up from a complex network of localised technical practices and devices. To begin to understand how modern government is possible over extended areas of territory it is critical to understand the spatial connectedness of technical devices. But of what does this connectedness consists? (p.12).

This connectedness, I would like to suggest, is grounded in the material-discursive practices in which relations are produced. The 'macro' order—an interconnected Europe—is produced through 'localised technical practices and devices'. Biebuyck and Rumford (2012) argued that Europe is 'made up' of practices of representation, narration, inscription, and performance. All of these practices may be supportive or disruptive to the making of an interconnected Europe/a European Information Society. In the following I will review some of these practices based on the insights presented in the vignette.

Representing and accounting Europe

The aim of ePractice was to build not just any ephemeral community but a visible one. Visibility was in part achieved through documented accounts of community performance. Hence, making the ePractice project accountable was part of the striving for the community's visibility. These accounting practices covered, amongst others, ePractice membership, community activity, as well as the success of ePractice's aim to facilitate knowledge sharing and learning. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance of proving 'that exchange has happened' (Knut). The way these accounts were imagined to represent and stand for the envisaged community ordered the material arrangements and configured ePractice accordingly (e.g. the ways in which connections were made visible and traceable).

John Law (1996) suggested that accounts tell us something about 'how things ought to be' (p.295). They make the underlying assumptions visible (e.g. concerning the type of community to be implemented). Important to the project was to configure an arrangement that makes accounting and representation possible: Accounting for activity on the Web portal (in form of registered users, blog entries, up-to-date case studies); accounting for success. In representing or better in *standing for* a European eGovernment community, ePractice opened up a European space in which a European community was produced. Its members were configured through the associations that particular material-discursive practices inscribed.

Narrating and Inscribing Europe

Europe is being mobilised and woven into the narratives of a 'European eGovernment community'. For example, Knut speaks of 'the common value of the European dimensions of eGovernment' to ePractice users, hence framing their work (practices) within a European context. Such narratives enrol individuals into the arrangements of ePractice in particular ways. Overall the 'paradigm shift' provided a powerful phrase for ePractice participants to present ePractice as a 'trendy meeting place for public administration' (Valerie). Success stories about Web 2.0 visionaries were applied to the European public sector and praised Knut's and Victor's endeavour. They introduced a 'truly innovative' European project, an initiative people wanted to be associated with and that is carried by the people.

The European Commission presented itself as a mere 'provider'. As such the notion of community also involved a moral claim: People want to be part of a European community, to be a European eGovernment practitioner.

Furthermore Europe was being inscribed through the ways in which ePractice member profiles were set-up (in a European context). Europe was also inscribed in the ways in which practitioners frame their work practice as 'European good practice'; through the ways in which profiles are set-up inscribing a European dimension to a practitioners CV and 'their' eGovernment projects. It is also accomplished through simple features such as the English language default, inscribing it as a lingua franca of the portal.

Performing Europe

The users registered to ePractice connect with others, they describe their eGovernment projects within a European context and—in so doing—they enact Europe. The performative conditions of the ePractice arrangement produce a European community which becomes instantiated with every connection the members perform at the portal (e.g. to other user profiles or sub-communities as well as through bookmarking or commenting on Web content). Europe is also being produced through the continuous refinement of its boundaries. For example ePractice performs a Europe in which Turkish eGovernment practitioners can participate and compete for the recognition of their 'best practices'. This then disrupts official policy-related discourses about the belonging of Turkey to Europe.

6 Conclusion

This paper has attended to a particular field of European policy making: eGovernment. While many of the challenges associated with the advances of eGovernment are seen to be at national or sub-national level, the European Commission determined its own role in supporting the developments through two types of activities: sharing and measuring. This paper has attended to sharing approaches as a means for opening a space for a European eGovernment community.

The paper demonstrated how material discursive practices related to representing, accounting, narrating, inscribing and performing produce a European community. As such these practices may support or disrupt policy discourses of an interconnected Europe.

Attending to material-discursive practices demonstrates that an 'interconnected Europe', a Network Society does not link independently existing actors, but rather that subjects and objects of a 'social network' come to be produced through association in such practices (for example as European eGovernment practitioners or European eGovernment good practice). ePractice did not only 'connect people' but a multitude of heterogeneous entities such as people, practices, resources, ideas, and public sector bodies and—in doing so—produced a *European* community space.

7 References

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