Dynamics of Strategic Agency and Participation in Strategy-Making:
The Entanglement of Human Actions, IT, and Other Materialities

Pikka-Maaria Laine, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland
Piritta Parkkari, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

ABSTRACT
Although there are a few studies that have highlighted the role of material artifacts, tools, and technologies as part of strategy-making, researchers need a more profound understanding of the dynamic entangling of human actions and materialities, and the performative effects of this in strategy-making. In particular, there is a paucity of knowledge regarding how the co-constitution of the social and material produce strategic agency. The authors draw from sociomateriality as a practice philosophical perspective to examine the dynamic construction of strategic agency in and through the continuous (re)configuring of human actions, information technology, and other materialities. The authors’ study is part of an ongoing ethnographic study of a Finnish entrepreneurship society that promotes startup entrepreneurship. Based on their analysis, the authors distinguish three strategy-making practices: informing the purpose of the entrepreneurship society, enacting startup scene membership, and providing IT services. The authors demonstrate how strategic agency is dispersed to humans, IT, and physical settings. However, the authors argue that it is not sufficient to focus on technologies or other materialities as such, but to acknowledge the whole sociomateriality of practices. Furthermore, the authors also argue that participation in strategy should be seen as a dynamic process of exclusion and inclusion.

Keywords: Agency, Configuring, Entrepreneurship, Information Technology, Sociomateriality, Startups, Strategy-As-Practice

1. INTRODUCTION
Information and communication technologies are becoming pervasive in many areas of human activity around the world (Walshman, 2012). Technology, especially information technology, has also made its way into strategy work, as software, visual aids, and analytic tools are becoming prevalent in strategy-making (Jarzabkowski & Pinch, 2013). Moreover, there
are increasing calls within strategy-as-practice research for an emphasis on material artifacts, technology, and the body in strategy-making (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). This has led to an emerging stream of research on strategy tools, material artifacts, and IT as part of strategy-making (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Kaplan, 2011; Stieger et al., 2012). Studies on materiality have provided important insights into the role and implications of material artifacts and technologies in strategy-making. What is not fully understood, though, is the dynamic entangling of human actions and materialities, and the performative effects of this in strategy-making. In particular, there is a paucity of knowledge regarding how the co-constitution of the social and material produce strategic agency.

We address this gap by examining how the continuous (re)configuring of human actions, information technology, and other materialities produce strategic agency. This is important because it extends our understanding of strategic agency, and helps us to explore how a larger number of people can participate in strategy-making in and through materiality. We draw from sociomateriality (Barad, 2003; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Suchman, 2007) as a practice philosophical approach (Orlikowski, 2010), because it sets aside the distinctiveness of social and material in favor of the ontological co-constitution of human activity and materialities in practice. It allows for the full acknowledgement of the inherent immanence of materiality in any practice. Social and material are in a constant process of (re)configuring. These sociomaterial configurations are seen as performative, which means that they produce what they are supposed to represent. In our study, we examine how they produce various issues within strategy-making - such as the organization, its purpose and characteristics of actors - in order to be able to highlight the construction of strategic agency. By strategy-making we refer to the actions that are consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival, and competitive advantage of the organization (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003). Strategic agency, in turn, means a capability to act in strategy-making (Giddens, 2001; Mantere, 2008; Thomas, 2009). We apply sociomateriality as a practice philosophical approach in our empirical study, which is part of an ongoing ethnography in a Finnish entrepreneurship society. Entrepreneurship societies are informal, non-accredited, mostly student-led societies that aim to promote entrepreneurship by arranging various activities around entrepreneurship (Pittaway, Rodriguez-Falcon, Ayiegbayo, & King, 2011).

Our study makes four contributions to strategy-as-practice research. First, we propose a novel practice theoretical approach to examine strategy-making: sociomateriality as a practice philosophical perspective. Second, we demonstrate how strategic agency is produced to both human and non-human actors in and through the continuous (re)configuring of human and non-human actions. Third, our study adds to studies on the role of technology in strategy-making by arguing that it is not sufficient to focus on information technologies – or other materialities – as such, but to acknowledge the whole sociomateriality of strategy practices. Fourth, we demonstrate the continuously changing dynamics of participation in strategy-making.

2. STRATEGY-MAKING AND SOCIOMATERIALITY

The strategy-as-practice stream of research has recently placed emphasis on strategy tools, material artifacts, and technology in strategy-making. Stenfors and Moisander (2008) brought to our attention the possible inadequacy of traditional strategy tools in the context of knowledge intensive organizations. Jarzabkowski and Spee (2011), in turn, elucidated how a strategic plan both shaped and was shaped by human interaction within the strategy process. Few studies have extended their focus from discursive tools into more three-dimensional artifacts. Whittington, Molloy, Mayer, and Smith (2006) showed how a ‘cube’ was developed within a strategy process as a material artifact to capture and carry
the message of strategy to the personnel of the organization. Heracleous and Jacobs (2011), in turn, demonstrated how participants in a strategy workshop constructed a metaphorical material structure to make sense of and discuss about their organization’s strategy.

In spite of the prevalence of software, visual aids, and analytic tools in strategy work, there are only a few studies that have focused on the role of information technology in strategy-making. Kaplan (2011) examined how the use of PowerPoint slides was part of the discursive practices of strategic knowledge production and enabled the participation of many people in the construction of strategy in a telecommunication company. Stieger, Matzler, Chatterjee, and Ladstaetter-Fussenegger (2012), in turn, provided a rare example of using information technology to involve the entire personnel in the strategy-making of a medium-sized Austrian technology company. Furthermore, Jarzabkowski, Spee, and Smets (2013) demonstrated how underwriting managers used photos, maps, data packs, spreadsheets, and graphs to make decisions that shaped their firm’s strategy.

Although the concept of sociomateriality has also been applied to the area of practice-based studies on strategy (Jarzabkowski & Pinch, 2013), most of the extant research tends to assume that humans and technology are distinct entities, which – even though mutually interacting and dependent – have inherent characteristics and some a priori independence from each other. To some extent, this may be due to the existing strategy-as-practice studies within which strategy practices have been (implicitly) defined as distinct entities that have some a priori existence from the human actions (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Orlikowski, 2010). Another legacy may come from the practice-based studies of technology and organizations, which have a longer tradition of studying technology in an organizational context than strategy-as-practice research.

However, even the stream of technology and organization studies has mainly examined technology in use (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). It has acknowledged how the meaning of technology both shapes and is shaped by human interaction (ibid.). Some of the studies have focused on the interpretations of technology (e.g., Carlile, 2002; Boudreau & Robey, 2005). For example, Boudreau and Robey (2005) use an interpretive lens to explain the enactment of an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. Other studies have examined the recursive nature of structures of technology and social action (Barley, 1990; Orlikowski, 2000). Orlikowski (2000), for example, draws from Giddensian (1984) structuration theory to demonstrate how structures of Lotus Notes technology were constructed emergent in the recurrent use of technology. Still, there are calls to take the ontological underpinning of sociomateriality (Barad, 2003; Suchman, 2007) seriously within studies on technology and organization (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Scott and Orlikowski (2012) provide quite a rare demonstration of the reconfiguring of sociomaterial relations and their performative effects. They studied how the TripAdvisor website and the travelers and hoteliers who interact with it constituted a practice of accountability that had significant implications for the practices and outcomes of the hotel business.

In spite of the advances made in studies of technology in organizational and strategy contexts, there is more room for research on materiality in general and information technology in particular in strategy-making. We propose sociomateriality (Barad, 2003; Orlikowski & Scott, 2007; Suchman, 2007) as a practice philosophical perspective (Orlikowski, 2010) to examine the dynamic entangling of human actions and information technology in strategy-making, and the performative effects of this. Sociomateriality is a theoretical approach that has been brought up in the areas of material feminism (Barad, 2003), science and technology studies (Suchman, 2007), and research on technology and organizations (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). To some extent, it may be seen as a counterforce to linguistic turn, which is seen to overemphasize the social by considering reality and material as constructed in and through
language. Within sociomateriality, nature and material are seen as agentic – they act, and those actions have consequences for humans and non-humans. Sociomateriality wants to deconstruct the reality/language dichotomy and incorporate the material and the discursive (Alaimo & Heckman, 2008).

Hence, sociomateriality (no hyphen) emphasizes that human subjects and material objects have no attributes as distinct entities but come to exist in and through mutual constitution of each other. Whereas “interaction suggest[s] two entities, given in advance, that come together and engage in some kind of exchange… intra-action underscores the sense in which subjects and objects emerge through their encounters with one another” (Suchman, 2007, p. 267). Intra-action focuses on materialization and meaning-making – the “specific material reconfigurings” that constitute the world (Barad, 2007, p. 142). Hence, sociomaterial configurations are seen as performative: they produce what they purport to name (Barad, 2003; Butler, 2006). Furthermore, practice is the space in which social and material become constitutively entangled (Orlikowski, 2010). Social and material are embedded in practices; thus, all practices are sociomaterial. Hence, the sociomaterial philosophical perspective leads us to formulate our research question to ask how the (re)configuring of information technology, other materialities, and human actions produces strategic agency.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Context

Our empirical research is an ongoing ethnographic study of a Finnish entrepreneurship society that we refer to as ‘StartingUp’ (pseudonym). Entrepreneurship societies have become a widespread phenomenon globally (Pittaway et al., 2011). In Finland, the first entrepreneurship society was founded in Helsinki in 2009, and in 2014 there were about 15 societies throughout the country. Entrepreneurship societies are non-accredited, student-led societies that seek to educate, inspire, and encourage entrepreneurial interest (Pittaway et al., 2011). They attract students who are interested in learning about enterprise and developing enterprising skills either to start their own businesses or to become people who are more enterprising (Pittaway et al., 2011). StartingUp engages mainly in organizing startup entrepreneurship-related events at its “home base” (field notes), a small space in an industrial building. The events usually include speeches by entrepreneurs or people involved in entrepreneurial support. StartingUp’s events are open to the public and there is no official membership. The people who participate in the events are usually students from two local universities and most of them represent the fields of business, IT (programming), or design, but the active group of people running StartingUp also include young people who are already engaged in the working life.

We selected StartingUp as a research context because it is part of the “startup scene” (field notes) in Finland. Startup discourse emphasizes scalability, technology, fast market entry, growth, agility, and the importance of teams (e.g., Ries, 2011; Blank, 2013). This discourse is prevalent in StartingUp as well. Since technology explicitly plays a big part in the startup scene, StartingUp makes an excellent case for increasing our understanding of how the entanglement of information technology, other materialities, and human action produce strategy-making. In part, we selected StartingUp because it was founded shortly before data collection began. This allowed us to map out strategy-making in real time in an early phase of an organization’s development and see the continuous processes in which the social and the material are entangled, thereby gaining insight into how and why events play out over time (Langley, 1999).

3.2. Fieldwork, Data, and Analysis

We relied on ethnography to study the entanglements of human actions, information technology, and other materialities in strategy-making. Ethnography is about understanding how a
particular community (in our case StartingUp) lives by studying events, language, rituals, institutions, behaviors, artifacts, and interactions (Cunliffe, 2010). We followed ethnography as an epistemological stance and a way of engaging with the world around us, rather than a clear-cut method of data collection (ibid.). As ethnographic fieldwork involves working with people for long periods in their natural setting (Fettermann, 2010, p. 33), the second author has been conducting the fieldwork since September 2013. This was the time StartingUp held its first public events. Here we report the data generated between September 2013 and March 2014.

Data collection in ethnography is not about strict procedures or the quantity of certain kinds of data, but it is about doing what it takes to understand how we create meanings and live our lives with others (Cunliffe, 2010). Our data were mainly collected by attending the formal events and activities of StartingUp, especially the almost-weekly talks at the home base of the community. In all the activities and events, the second author took field notes and some events were audiotaped. She also took photographs and participated in the informal discussions and activities of the community. Furthermore, she tracked StartingUp on social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and the community’s webpage and engaged in Facebook discussions. The second author also conducted and transcribed seven semi-structured, audiotaped interviews with the project manager of StartingUp, four people actively taking part in the community, a development manager from TechCo (pseudonym for a technology and innovation center in a mid-Finnish city that established StartingUp), and a local entrepreneur involved in the community. In these semi-structured one-to-one interviews she followed a story-telling approach (Czarniawska, 2004). This allowed the interviewees to express their experiences without too much guidance on the part of the interviewer and to provide us with the rich, descriptive data regarding the purpose and development of StartingUp and its network. Eventually, the fieldwork also led the second author to become an active and trusted member (Adler & Adler, 1987) of the community, which enabled her to participate in its actions and practices.

Our analysis proceeded as follows. First, the second author constructed a thickly descriptive, chronological story (Langley, 1999) of StartingUp’s development from the establishment of the project in early 2013 until March 2014 based on observations, field notes, interviews, and social media feeds. Based on the story, we then coded (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) the strategizing activities of StartingUp by which we refer to all those actions that relate to the purpose, future, survival, and competitiveness of the community (Johnson et al., 2003). In response to the research question concerning the (re)configuring of information technology, other materialities, and human actions, we then scrutinized how human and non-human activities produced each other, and formed configurations. We then analyzed the various performative effects of these configurations, i.e. what these configurations produced. Here we used insights from textual analysis (Tischer, Meyer, Wodak & Vetter, 2000) to examine how textual acts and other acts produced each other as well as various other issues such as the organization, its purpose, and the characteristics of the actors. In and through this, we were able to explore how strategic agency was dispersed both to human and non-human actors. We distinguished three strategy-making practices according to a discernible shift in the strategic agency of people: informing the purpose of the entrepreneurship society, enacting startup scene membership, and providing IT services. Finally, we composed our results section to elucidate the continuous co-constitutive (re)configuring of human actions, information technology, and materialities, and the performative effects of these within the strategy-making practices.

The claims made in the results section are based on our reading of ethnographic data, and we do not want to give the impression that no other interpretations could be (re)constructed from our material. We also recognize that the second author has played a significant role in
co-constructing the story of StartingUp, both in interaction with the participants as a researcher and also as one of the actors in the story, a member of the community. However, we see this engagement as a strength, since it allowed for the nuanced description and informed interpretation of the (re)configurations that produced StartingUp’s strategy-making.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Informing the Purpose of StartingUp

At the beginning of 2013, the entrepreneurship society StartingUp was established in and through the institutionalized project management and financing procedures of technology and innovation centers in Finland. One of the local managers of TechCo, a technology and innovation center in a mid-sized Finnish city, created the project by defining a project plan for two years. The procedure established StartingUp differently compared to most of the other entrepreneurship societies, since it provided financing for a hired project manager. In contrast, most of the other entrepreneurship societies had been student-led proposals that operate on a voluntary basis. As stated in the project plan, the purpose of StartingUp was “to establish new companies and create new jobs in the area” (Project plan of StartingUp).

TechCo set up a webpage as well as Facebook and Twitter accounts for StartingUp. They materialized the organization of StartingUp to various stakeholders such as the local community, other technology and innovation centers, and entrepreneurship societies in Finland. The purpose of StartingUp was reconstructed on the webpage to be a supporting actor who activates entrepreneurial people and aids new ventures:

*We develop StartingUp in co-operation with business operators and universities from the local region. StartingUp activates people who are innovative, courageous and curious. We build networks with other Entrepreneurship Societies, Startups and Investors. We operate among the entrepreneurs of the future. We help them to develop business concepts and to create innovative Startup Teams. We also organize inspirational events with an entrepreneurial spirit and great performers. (StartingUp webpage)*

The text draws from the startup discourse. It constructs entrepreneurs as innovative, courageous, and curious forerunners, with which StartingUp wants to co-operate. By defining itself as a link to investors, StartingUp holds an important role in the field of startup businesses. Within the startup discourse, a webpage is not seen as a sufficient media; Facebook and Twitter appeal as additional communicative platforms. However, TechCo did not produce social media as interactive, but constructed it as a one-way communication channel for delivering the purpose and messages of StartingUp. Without asking the residents, the following post determines the purpose of StartingUp as a joint accomplishment between the residents in the area:

*Our common goal is to create dozens of new companies in the local region within the next two years. Join us! (StartingUp Facebook)*

In May 2013, a young man – Tim (a pseudonym) – with work experience from a startup company and municipal politics was hired as a project manager to develop the community and help it in establishing new companies. Tim started to arrange various types of events at the StartingUp facilities. He continued to use Facebook and Twitter to inform people about the events and post his photos of them; thus, enhancing the one-way communication channel through social media. The posts reconstructed StartingUp as a dynamic forerunner that creates great experiences for everyone who participates:

*It’s the beginning of a very good week! [--] The day after tomorrow [the local city] will explode because of the awesome Launch Event*
Furthermore, drawing from the startup discourse, the posts reproduced the heroic ethos for the startup entrepreneurs. They were constructed almost as saviors of the universe by commending them for “doing a grand job for humankind” (StartingUp Twitter). The character of an entrepreneur was also produced in and through the events organized by StartingUp. The ideal startup entrepreneur was embodied by Marc (a pseudonym), a local creative industry startup entrepreneur. He applied a ‘cozy’ presentation mode by sitting on a sofa with his two-year-old son. Moreover, he did not focus on presenting his company, but spoke instead about his everyday life as an entrepreneur, which he constructed as a “life full of surprises – which I kind of love and which make me feel alive” (field notes). The sofa, the son, and Marc’s presentation materialized the easy-going and autonomous lifestyle of an entrepreneur, who does what he wants with his life. For him, entrepreneurship wells up from his passion; he then enacts it. Work becomes like play and this leads to endless possibilities: “Do what you love and the rest will come. Doing the thing you love gives you power” (Marc’s presentation). Marc emphasized that although he “works 24/7” (field notes), he does what he loves and would do it anyway – even without monetary compensation. Marc’s presentation produced the startup entrepreneur as an active, independent, and restless person whose passion overrides any stress caused by work.

The startup discourse emphasizes that learning by doing and ‘getting things done’ is appreciated more than elaborate planning. However, at StartingUp’s events, participants did not engage in doing ‘things’ or working together. Rather, they sat down to listen to presentations and left the facilities after the events. During a pitching competition, the audience was invited to pitch their ideas. All of the presentations were provided in a traditional type of setting, where the presenter used PowerPoint or Prezi, and spoke in front of the audience, which sat in a classroom format listening quietly. They provided long presentations of their organizations. Many of the presenters embodied a traditional type of entrepreneur. These men in their forties reproduced a traditional type of understanding of entrepreneurship. The audience consisted of students who did not seem to get too excited about the presentations. Even though Marc applied a cozy presentation style by sitting on a sofa with his small child, his presentation constructed a traditional transmission mode type of communication, whereby the audience became quiet listeners.

The configuring and reconfiguring of information technology, the physical setting, and their usage constructed both the purpose of StartingUp and how the purpose and the future of the community were defined and by whom. Overall, the project plan, webpage, and posts materialized StartingUp as a community, and produced the community to promote technology- and growth-oriented startup entrepreneurship, and not just any kind of entrepreneurship. Hence, strategic agency was produced to both human and non-human actors. Reconstruction of the startup discourse offered subjectivities for people who are active, passionate, and enjoy a ‘getting-things-done’ culture. However, people other than the project manager were not invited to participate in defining the purpose of StartingUp, nor were they included in planning and organizing the events. Furthermore, the space of StartingUp’s facilities as well as the PowerPoint and Prezi format of the presentations oriented the other participants to sit in traditional classroom formation and listen quietly. This passivity was obvious on one occasion when the project manager – who had planned and organized the events – had to leave early. He asked two of the participants to lead a discussion about the activities that the participants would like StartingUp to have in the future. Very few ideas were suggested and the discussion was soon terminated. Hence, the continuous configuring of social actions and material objects seemed to reproduce the traditional top-down type of strategy-making.
4.2. Enacting Startup Scene Membership

In January 2014, StartingUp organized a get-together event for all Finnish entrepreneurship societies in a remote location over a weekend. The purpose of the event was posted on Facebook as follows: “to ‘break the ice’ between the Finnish entrepreneurship societies, to get people from them to know each other, and to establish more co-operation between the societies.” The posting constructed StartingUp as an equal member among the community of entrepreneurship societies, who could provide suggestions for co-operation. Furthermore, the project plan also guided Tim to construct the members of StartingUp as part of the representatives of entrepreneurship societies. Since the plan insisted that StartingUp would be run by voluntary forces during 2015, Tim provided the event with the purpose of getting the active members of StartingUp to get to know each other and people from other entrepreneurship societies better. The activity of the members was defined by their participation in previous events. Facebook was now constructed as an exclusive media by sending an invitation to the event to a selected group of people.

Altogether 30 people – young women and men – from seven different entrepreneurship societies attended the event, including nine people from StartingUp. These were the “active” (Tim, project manager, field notes) ones who had attended previous events regularly. The event was composed of informal discussions and formal workshops. The informal occasions were set up with Finnish traditions, such as sauna, hole in the ice for winter swimming, fireplace, and beer. The material arrangements provided the participants with a cozy atmosphere for becoming easily acquainted with each other, and enhancing informal discussions about the purpose and actions of entrepreneurship societies.

The informal discussions in a cozy setting enabled the people from StartingUp to engage in discussions, which, in turn, provided them with equal membership among the representatives of entrepreneurship societies. There was lots of chitchat, but a lot of the discussion revolved around the importance of technology for Finnish companies in their efforts to achieve success, growth, and internationalization. The more established societies also shared their experiences. A community manager of one society – a young woman – told about their business acceleration program, which was targeted exclusively for new, technology-based startup companies that strive for internationalization and growth. The discussions produced the participants as part of the startup world. What is noteworthy is that identification with the startup scene was not just a consequence of the cozy setting and joint discussions, but a condition for them, since the participants embodied the coziness with their youth and comfortable presence.

There was also a formal workshop to plan the purpose and the future of co-operation between attending entrepreneurship societies. One of the ideas produced during the workshop was to establish a common website for all the Finnish entrepreneurship societies. Some of the participants started to accomplish the task immediately. This was enabled because all the participants had laptops and smartphones with them. They reserved a domain, made a preliminary sketch of the website, and published it. The website made the co-operation of entrepreneurship societies matter – both in the sense of making it important and materializing it. This enhanced postings about the webpage and the event on Twitter, and tagging all of the participating entrepreneurship societies:

A couple of things have taken action, one of which is this webpage. (John, Twitter)

The webpage and Twitter posts about it enacted the action oriented ‘lean startup’ spirit (Ries, 2011), which is valued in the startup discourse, and emphasized in the discussions during the event. In addition to the webpage, social media provided a virtual presence for the event through photos and messages about the presentations on Twitter and Facebook, and comments on posts. It published the private, secluded event. The public presence enhanced
postings by the participants of the event, which, in turn, provoked the postings of other members of societies not attending the event. Hence, the virtual presence was not just a consequence of using social media, but a condition for intensified usage of social media. Virtual presence enabled more postings and hype about the event as the participants posted comments about it and both the other participants and people outside the event commented on the posts.

During the event, it was noteworthy that the members of StartingUp were the ones producing the membership, not the Facebook invitation that had constructed the membership when the event was launched. The members of StartingUp were confronted with questions about their operation: “So, what do you do in StartingUp?” “What events do you have coming up?” and “What kind of people do you have there?” (Field notes)

The questions within the ponderings about startups forced the members of StartingUp to stop and think about what they were doing and why – something that the earlier events had not done. They changed the way they spoke about StartingUp, and started to talk about it as their project: “What we are doing” (field notes). They presented their ideas for future entrepreneurship-related events. Further, some of the photos posted on Twitter showed the members of StartingUp presenting their ideas (StartingUp on Twitter). This all produced StartingUp as a joint venture and the members as “the StartingUp people” (field notes).

The configuring and reconfiguring of social actions and material objects during the event constructed StartingUp as an equal within the Finnish entrepreneurship societies. The webpage and posts on Facebook and Twitter materialized the presence of co-operation between entrepreneurship societies, which further enhanced postings in social media. Furthermore, the cozy physical setting provided joint discussions. Participation in discussions and constructing a webpage, postings, and presentations, as well as receiving questions about the operations of StartingUp produced the members of StartingUp as part of the larger entrepreneurship society community. Importantly, it produced StartingUp as their joint venture and them as ‘us’.

4.3. Providing IT Services

After the get-together event, Tim (the project manager) invited the nine StartingUp members who had attended the event and seven other people who had actively participated in earlier events to a closed and secret Facebook group called the “StartingUp core team” (field notes). This Facebook group format meant that only people in the group were able to see that the group exists. The “core team” embodied the “holy trinity, the perfect startup team, [which] consists of coders, graphic designers, and business people” (Tim, project manager, interview). The Facebook format of the group constructed certain people as the exclusive core team, who were allowed to take part in planning the future of StartingUp, organizing events, and arranging co-operation. The following post provides the group with the task of formulating the future of StartingUp:

[...] We plan the communication and events/activities of StartingUp. In brief, you tell the ideas, we plan and Tim does the work! (Core team Facebook)

The post also changes Tim’s role from the central planner to a member of the planning group with a specific responsibility to implement the plans.

The core team then reconstructed Facebook as their internal communication platform. It was used for holding virtual meetings, preparing the up-coming events, and planning the future. The startup discourse guided an emphasis on IT in discussions. The easy-going attitude of startup entrepreneurship was reconstructed by portraying how IT people were “lured in by saying that there will be beer and pizza” (Kevin, a coder, interview). Furthermore, the IT-people were very active in the group. Hence, the discussed business ideas were related to information technology and the planned events
became more IT-focused. For example, lots of time was devoted to planning “a Hackathon” (field notes), which was an event that involved software development in groups over a limited amount of time.

Constructing the core team simultaneously excluded other people from defining and developing StartingUp. However, this was produced as inevitable, as illustrated in the following extract from a Facebook chat:

Yes, the Facebook group weeds out people who come to events only occasionally from the core activities of StartingUp. [...] The good thing about this is that the core team clearly stands out and is able to act a bit more ‘seriously’ and the bad thing is that for those who really want to take part, it is not that easy to get into the ‘inner circles.’ However, this is pretty much unavoidable. (Private Facebook chat between Peter – a coder – and the second author)

The establishment of the “core team” is constructed to matter because it materializes the core team in relation to the undefined others. It provides the core team with the authority to act, and constructs the actions of the core team as more important than the actions of others. However, the secret Facebook group format did not expose this position to any stakeholders.

The project plan guided StartingUp to establish co-operation with local entrepreneurs. This was reformulated by the project manager: “We need to co-operate with local companies in order to start doing things, take StartingUp to the next level, and increase the resources available for organizing bigger events in the future” (Tim, project manager, field notes). Expressing the necessity of moving to the “next level” reproduces the idea that companies need to make visible the difference between the future and the present. Drawing from the startup discourse, co-operation with local entrepreneurs was defined as a “problem solving program” (field notes) in February 2014. The label of the program offers a promise for providing solutions. It targeted local entrepreneurs with small or medium-sized businesses who could bring a problem to the StartingUp team, who would then suggest solutions. Instead of intensive planning of the program, the team hastily met the first entrepreneur at the facilities of StartingUp. This enacted the ‘learning-by-doing’ mode of action. The core team suggested solutions based on information technology, such as building up the business with 3D modeling for the entrepreneur whose company was operating in a traditional field of business.

It was agreed upon that the core team would not receive any monetary compensation for their service: “Without getting paid like a real company” (field notes). This constructed the operation as providing the core team members with an opportunity to gain experience and references for future business and personal CVs. However, this defined the program differently compared to the common connotation of providing solutions as services. This discrepancy became apparent when there were confused expectations in the meeting with the second entrepreneur:

It feels like [the co-operating entrepreneur] is constantly asking for more and more new services: his ideas are puffing up like bread dough. He might have misunderstood a bit that it is not the purpose of StartingUp to produce or market events ‘like a company,’ but to provide him with the ideas/visions. (Private Facebook chat between Mary – a designer – and the second author)

The entrepreneur expected the team to provide services for his needs, such as organizing events for his business. The message above shows frustration, which then culminates in the team defining the services that they are willing to provide, such as IT consulting and minor software development. The team emphasized that their role was to provide ideas because they would not receive monetary compensation for their work. Furthermore, they insisted that their services would need to be available for everybody:
The point was that if we create a tool, it can be published as an open source tool so that anyone can use it if they want. (Steven, a coder, field notes)

Even though StartingUp was now enacting IT entrepreneurship by providing services for other entrepreneurs, the team emphasized that the role of StartingUp was only to provide limited services so that it would not “step on the toes of existing companies by offering free services” (Tim, project manager, field notes).

The configuring and reconfiguring of information technology and its usage constructed StartingUp as a community of service providers. The core team members were constructed as the active actors who took part in developing StartingUp and providing services. Newcomers and other people interested in StartingUp – but unable to regularly attend its events – were not given an opportunity to participate in negotiations about the future of StartingUp or to co-operate with local entrepreneurs. This reproduced a traditional setting in which only a limited group of actors was able to take part in the strategy-making of the organization.

5. DISCUSSION

We have examined the dynamic entangling of human actions and materialities, and the performative effects of this within strategy-making. In particular, we have focused on how the co-constitutive (re)configuring of the social and material produce strategic agency to both human and non-human actors. We have identified three strategy-making practices: informing the purpose of the entrepreneurship society, enacting startup scene membership, and providing IT services. Our analysis elucidates the dynamics of strategic agency and participation in strategy-making. It makes visible how strategic agency was dispersed to humans, IT, and physical settings. Moreover, it demonstrates the changing dynamics of enabling and restricting participation along the strategy-making process. First, the (re)configuring of human actions, IT, and other material setting produced a traditional top-down mode of strategy-making, and reserved strategic agency to certain people. Then, strategic agency was extended to a larger number of people. However, next, the exclusive nature of strategy work was reconstructed by appointing strategic agency to a restricted group of people. Hence, our study shows participation in strategy as a dynamic process of exclusion and inclusion.

We summarize the continuous sociomaterial (re)configuring and its performative effects within strategy-making in Table I. The table highlights how strategic agency is dispersed to include humans, information technology, and physical settings. Finally, it concludes the overall implications of the sociomaterial configuring for strategy-making, which brings forth participation in strategy as a continuously fluctuating process of exclusion and inclusion.

Our study makes four contributions to strategy-as-practice research. First, we propose sociomateriality (Barad, 2003; Orlikowski & Scott, 2007; Suchman, 2007) as a practice philosophical perspective (Orlikowski, 2010) to examine materiality in strategy-making. We ground this on an argument that the inadequacy of understanding materiality in the context of strategy (Jarzabkowski & Pinch, 2013; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) partly stems from inconsistent and broad definitions and theoretical conceptualizations of strategy practices (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), and the lack of theoretical frameworks with which to conceptualize the use of material objects within strategy-making. We ground this on an argument that the inadequacy of understanding materiality in the context of strategy (Jarzabkowski & Pinch, 2013; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) partly stems from inconsistent and broad definitions and theoretical conceptualizations of strategy practices (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), and the lack of theoretical frameworks with which to conceptualize the use of material objects within strategy-making (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). The ambiguity of the concept of practice within strategy-as-practice studies is partly due to many studies not drawing from practice theory (Carter et al., 2008; Chia & MacKay, 2007). The studies recognize that practices matter and entail a commitment to understanding what practitioners do ‘in practice’. From this basis, they then draw from various theoretical perspectives to examine strategy-making. There are also studies that draw from the practice theoretical perspective, and theorists such as
Table 1. The sociomaterial (re)configuring and its performative effects within strategy-making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice 1: Informing the Purpose of StartingUp</th>
<th>Strategic agency provided to</th>
<th>Summary of the implications for strategy-making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Configuring and reconfiguring the co-constitutive relationship of human actions, IT, and other materialities, and the performative effects of it</td>
<td>TechCo Project plan</td>
<td>Constructing the purpose of StartingUp as promoting startup entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized project management procedures and the project plan produce StartingUp as a two-year project, led by a project manager, monitored by TechCo, a local innovation and technology center.</td>
<td>TechCo Project plan</td>
<td>Producing strategic agency to both human and non-human actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TechCo establishes a webpage and Facebook and Twitter accounts for StartingUp, which create a virtual presence, materializing StartingUp to various stakeholders.</td>
<td>TechCo Project plan Social media posts</td>
<td>Reconstructing the top-down mode of strategy-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The purpose of StartingUp is stated in social media. Social media posts produce StartingUp as a promoter of entrepreneurship.</td>
<td>TechCo Project Manager</td>
<td>Denying active agency of the other people (e.g., residents, event attendees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The physical setting reconstructs the traditional transmission mode of communication, which means that one person performs and others listen quietly.</td>
<td>Presenting entrepreneurs Physical setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some posts and presentations produce an ideal startup entrepreneur, but prevent members from enacting it.</td>
<td>Project manager Startup entrepreneur Facebook &amp; Twitter Physical setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice 2: Enacting Startup Scene Membership</th>
<th>Strategic agency provided to</th>
<th>Summary of the implications for strategy-making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Configuring and reconfiguring the co-constitutive relationship of human actions, IT, and other materialities, and the performative effects of it</td>
<td>Project plan Project manager</td>
<td>Constructing StartingUp as an equal member among the entrepreneurship societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The project plan forces the project manager to establish a core group of volunteers who will take on StartingUp after the project funding runs out.</td>
<td>Project manager Facebook invitation</td>
<td>Producing strategic agency to both human and non-human actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted social media invitation for an event produces the participants for a co-operation event. Invitation imposes co-operation on participants.</td>
<td>Physical setting Participants of the event StartingUp members</td>
<td>Constructing members of StartingUp as part of the startup scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cozy physical setting (sauna, fireplace, beer) enhances informal discussions about startup entrepreneurship. Participation in discussions provides members of StartingUp with an equal membership among other representatives of entrepreneurship societies. Participants, in turn, embody youth and a cozy style of startup entrepreneurship.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Producing StartingUp as a joint venture for those members that attend the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laptops and smartphones enabled participants to launch a common webpage, which materializes their co-operation and enacts ‘learning-by-doing’. The virtual presence, in turn, enhances postings about the event on social media.</td>
<td>Participants of the event Laptops and smartphones Webpage and social media posts</td>
<td>Producing members of StartingUp as strategic planners of the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in discussions and constructing a webpage, postings, and presentations, as well as receiving questions about their operations produced members of StartingUp as ‘us’ and StartingUp as their joint venture.</td>
<td>StartingUp members Participants of the event Physical setting and IT equipment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued on following page
Foucault (1977), Giddens (1984), de Certeau (1984), Bourdieu (1990), Reckwitz (2002), Schatzki (2001), and Taylor (1985). Many of these studies are close to an ontological understanding that social reality is constituted in and through practice (Orlikowski, 2010). However, they do not explicitly draw from the practice philosophical stance as Orlikowski (2010, p. 27) defines it as entailing an ontological assertion that social reality is constituted in ongoing practices. Hence, we have set the task of examining materiality in strategy-making from this perspective. We argue that strategy-making is produced in and through the dynamic entangling of the social and material. We demonstrate the continuous (re)configuring of human actions, IT, and other materialities and the implications for strategy-making.

Second, our analysis shows how strategic agency is dispersed in an ongoing strategy-making process. More specifically, we demonstrate how strategic agency is produced to information technology and physical settings as well as to humans. Hence, we contribute to strategy research by showing how it is not just humans that are active actors in strategy-making, but materialities can also be seen as strategic actors. We argue that different sociomaterial configurations of the social and the material produce various human and non-human actors’ agency, which constantly take shape and are enacted and re-enacted in an ongoing course of strategy-making. This adheres to views on strategic agency that acknowledge that agency is not an essence that is inherent in humans, but a capacity realized through the associations of actors (whether human or non-human), and thus, it is relational, emergent, and shifting (Latour, 1987, 1992, 2005 in Orlikowski, 2007).

Third, our study contributes to studies on the role of technology in strategy-making. Extant studies have examined the use of information technology or other material artifacts in providing the possibility for a larger number of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice 3: Providing IT services</th>
<th>Strategic agency provided to</th>
<th>Summary of the implications for strategy-making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Configuring and reconfiguring the co-constitutive relationship of human actions, IT, and other materialities, and the performative effects of it</td>
<td>Project manager Format of Facebook group Facebook posts Core team</td>
<td>Reconstructing the exclusive nature of strategy work Producing strategic agency to both human and non-human actors Constructing StartingUp as an IT service provider Producing the core team as IT entrepreneurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The format of the Facebook group produces certain people as an exclusive core team that is not visible to all stakeholders. Posting provides the group with the task of formulating the future of StartingUp. In turn, the secret Facebook group format excludes others.</td>
<td>Core team Facebook posts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The core team reconstructs Facebook as their internal communication platform. Startup discourse guides the focus on IT in discussions and events and posts reconstruct the importance of IT.</td>
<td>Project plan Startup discourse Label of program Mode of operation (service provision without monetary compensation) Local entrepreneurs Core team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The project plan directs establishing co-operation with local entrepreneurs. Startup discourse guides the co-operation to be materialized as a program labelled “Problem solving program.” The label offers the promise of providing solutions for entrepreneurs. Providing solutions free of charge constructs the program as a source of experience and references for the core team. These different definitions create a struggle. This forces the core team to define their services as IT consulting and minor software development.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Continued
people to participate in strategy-making (Kaplan, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Stieger et al., 2013). Our study resonates with these studies by demonstrating how the use of information technology produces strategic agency for a large number of people. However, our study adds to this stream of research by elucidating how extended strategic agency of humans was produced simultaneously in two realms: virtual and physical. Hence, it was not just IT, but the whole material setting that contributed to extending strategic agency of humans. We argue that it is not sufficient to focus on information technology—or other materialities—as such, but to acknowledge the whole sociomateriality of practices when examining how materialities in general and IT in particular enable or constrain the strategic agency of people.

Fourth, participation has been acknowledged as a key issue in strategy process and practice research since it is seen to increase commitment and the quality of strategies (Laine & Vaara, forthcoming 2015). Strategy-as-practice research has explicitly focused on examining the actions and practices that enable or restrict participation (Mantere, 2005, 2008; Mantere & Vaara, 2010; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). However, since only a few studies have examined the role of materiality in inclusion or exclusion in strategy-making, we demonstrate the continuously changing dynamic of exclusion and inclusion in and through sociomaterial configurations. In the startup context, strategic agency is offered for many people, but our study shows how sociomaterial (re)configurations may contradict this offering.

We propose that further research should focus on the body within sociomaterial strategy-making configurations. This is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in strategy-making, since there is a paucity of knowledge regarding how different kinds of bodies and differently abled bodies are able and allowed to participate in strategy work. Furthermore, configurations should be researched in more detail by scrutinizing the material setting of information technology and boundary objects within IT. This is important for making sure we account for the whole sociomateriality of strategy-making practices and acknowledge how different materialities are involved in the configurings. Finally, we propose that future research studies should empirically ascertain how the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion work out over time in more established organizations. The results reported here are from one organization’s nascent phase and we encourage other researchers to account for the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion in different phases of organizing to see whether these dynamics vary considerably.

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REFERENCES


Pikka-Maaria Laine works as an associate professor of management at the University of Lapland, Finland. She also holds a position of an Adjunct Professor of Strategic Management at the University of Eastern Finland. Her research interests revolve around strategy making, subjectivities, power and resistance, and she has published in academic journals. In addition to her university position she also works as a facilitator in dialogical strategy work. She has acted as a leading member of strategy-as-practice standing working group at EGOS, and a board member of Finnish Strategic Management Society.

Piritta Parkkari is a PhD student in management and organization at the University of Lapland. Her research is focused on critical entrepreneurship research, especially on the very early phases of the entrepreneurship process. She is doing ethnographic fieldwork in a Finnish Entrepreneurship Society, where she is trying to understand the Finnish ‘startup scene’ and theorize how people become entrepreneurs. She is particularly interested in how sociomaterial spaces and practice produce certain kinds of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial identities. In her research, she aims towards emancipatory and inclusive practices in entrepreneurship.