

1 Introduction

Since 2008, public take-up of social media in Norway has shown a steep upwards curve. Social media has been diffused and instituted across Norwegian society, leading to a high adoption rate. In 2014, an estimated 3 million Norwegians were registered on the Social Network Site (SNS) Facebook, 1.1 million have a professional CV profile on LinkedIn, about 1 million were on the mobile photo-sharing service Instagram, 1.2 million were linked to Google+, about 900,000 had a user profile on the microblogging service Twitter, and 1.1 million were using the video-messaging application Snapchat (Metronet, 2015). Simultaneously, social media has been adopted by a variety of organizations, including those belonging to the Norwegian Public Sector (NPS). In 2015, 90 percent of Norwegian government agencies were reported to be registered on social media platforms (SSB, 2015). These numbers are remarkable, considering that the total population of Norway is 5 million.

At the same time, we can observe a diffusion of uses, practices, activities, and exchange of ideas embedded in social media within organizations belonging to the NPS. This is demonstrated in tendencies seen in organizational life. First, public administrations with a degree of autonomy and corporate status communicate *externally* with citizens on Facebook and Twitter. Second, public administrations have implemented social intranets, modeling them to resemble professional SNSs like Yammer. Third, public employees “import” their *private* social media habits to work, as they connect with colleagues, create work Facebook groups, share documents in the file hosting service Dropbox, and co-write documents in the web office suite Google Docs. Fourth, the term “social media” is used in *official documents*, appearing in strategy plans and steering documents. Official guidelines for use of social media are commonplace. Fifth, municipalities, county council administrations, state agencies, and state-owned companies allocate human resources to social media, as employees may have social media as part of their *job descriptions*. Sixth, public employees *acquire formal competence*, as they attend post-secondary education courses at universities and business schools, giving them formal qualifications. Seventh, social media is part of a national *e-learning project*, as public employees train to become change agents, promoting how social media can be used for organizational change and development. Eighth, the concept of “*sharing*” is recurrently used, representing a solution able to break down internal organizational boundaries and enhance knowledge sharing and competence building. Ninth, there are many organized *venues* where public servants congregate and listen to a pool of keynote speakers, who explain what social media “is” and what it is “not”. And lastly, there is the *cultural production* of organizational social media literacies, consisting of practitioner books that explain how to use social media in organizations.

Consequently, social media have gained a foothold in organizations, but it is unclear what the potential effects of its presence are in the long run. Organizations respond and adapt to social media in various ways, as it can challenge how they link internal goals, priorities, and activities to a changing external environment, for example. The above tendencies are seldom coordinated by a central authority, but find their way through the orchestration of local bottom-up and top-down *initiatives* carried out by a variety of local actors. Local social media initiatives are in addition characterized by explorative questions of *sensemaking*, as employees try to derive meaning from the experience of using the technology. Social media is approached as *ambiguous*, requiring it to be *explained* and *interpreted* into local realities, implying that we still have an unclear idea of what it “is”.

These tendencies in organizational life serve as the backdrop for this study.

1.1 Research objective: Four stories about social media in organizations

The research objective is to provide and perform an explorative and qualitative study and address the potential impact that social media might have on organizational life. This is realized by establishing a micro perspective showing a gradual adoption and implementation of social media from the point of view of an actor who interacts from *inside* an organization. This is empirically illustrated by examining the outcomes and processes of a set of initiatives performed by people who work in the organizations chosen to make up this study. These initiatives demonstrate how humans translate, organize, construct, and enact local organizations around social media, which are based on their understandings, actions, and interpretations of social media and connect to the organizational context in which they interact. These initiatives are analyzed by combining bottom-up and top-down perspectives and by using analytical concepts from organization studies. These perspectives are intended to trace and illustrate the consequences of social media initiatives in organizations belonging to the NPS, covering the period from 2008 to 2014. For analytical clarification, in this thesis *social media* is preliminarily defined as a set of low threshold web interactive and participative based technologies used for social interactions and for creating, exchanging, and sharing information and ideas in online network communities. An *organization* is tentatively defined as a human institutional arrangement consisting of multiple, distributed, and decentralized institutions possessing different goals, activities, and autonomies which is connected to an external environment.

Specifically, the research objective is to capture the particular conditions, opportunities, and limitations offered and generated by social media, as it is assumed that social media allows users in organizations to organize and coordinate in new ways that are different than what was previously possible. This concerns the structural and technical properties of social media, as it is a developing cloud-based Internet technology that could challenge and rewrite the ways in which ICT tools are traditionally administrated and organized within organizations. It goes without saying that ICTs in organizations are usually governed by an institutional control regime which can define and set the premises for technology use as well as organizational activities and performances. The institutional control regime often has a top-down governing logic which sets restrictions on what its users are allowed and not allowed to do. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in the processes of adoption and implementation of new technologies in organizations and regulates the work practices of employees. In this regard, a common experience is the repeated pattern that adoption and implementation of ICTs can generate unintended consequences. Technology designers and implementers have often observed that end-users can decide to use or enact ICTs in unexpected ways, different than those originally planned or intended, a factor making the process of adoption and implementation of ICTs difficult to predict or control. Furthermore, technology users can be capable of constructing new *emergent social structures* which are enacted and based on the use and interpretation of technologies and can become socially objectified and institutionalized by recursive human action, potentially producing changes or new social organizations.

My study assumes that the arrival of social media could have created increased and simplified conditions for this latter phenomenon. And there are good reasons to explore this condition in greater detail because the plethora of social media services now allows users to start engaging and communicating with peers easily and at a very low cost. Humans can build, institutionalize, and organize social networks by use of social media, a condition that gives us the possibility to take initiatives and create new organizations. Moreover, this creates the potential to use technologies in new and unexpected ways. These structural and technical properties mean that humans can now, by forms of individual enactments or mass-collaboration, use social media's participatory digital culture to produce emergent social structures.

Over the last few years, this appears to have become a tendency in the social media landscape. The links between human initiatives and recurring engagement with social media platforms have created and constituted a range of mediated social media phenomena in *society at large*. These include Internet memes, cyber currencies, hactivism, gaming, dating, and types of identity management, for example. They are the end-result of human creativity, innovation, and engineering and appear to be guided by their own cultural logics. These social media phenomena are even harder to predict or control and are seldom under any “central command” issuing directives – they are essentially *user-driven* and shaped by the contributions from users. Some have the potential to emerge into powerful arrangements and can contradict the position of established institutions, a factor that is valid when trespassing upon and challenging the established domains of particular industries or economies. During the writing of this thesis, the advent of the mobile apps company Uber and the lodging app Airbnb have challenged the taxi and hotel industries or private rental markets in countries worldwide, manifesting the rise of the “sharing economy”. In contrast, what happens and what types of understanding are socially constructed and enacted when local actors in organizations – in either first-line or top-management positions – decide to import, translate, introduce, and legitimize social media and create social media practices through initiatives they organize?

The thesis addresses this matter. The potential of social media to create emergent temporary organizations is empirically explored by examining four different case stories. These case stories examine how a set of defined actors in organizations take the initiative to start using or decide to introduce the same low threshold Internet technology to the members of the organization. Characteristic of these initiatives is how the actors “import” or implement social media and its embedded ideas onto the turf of an organization and initiate a form of activity or embed social media into an existing work practice. From there, the actors form potential work processes which can result in the social constituting of a successful or failed local organizing or social media practice. Common to all these organizations is that they are linked to social media and it would be much more challenging to realize them if the technology were absent. The reality of the local organizations becomes clearer – or perhaps gets a “social life” – when they potentially contradict organizational measures initiated by an organization or its institutional logics. For analytical reasons, I refer to the local organizations as “models”. I use the term as an analytical instrument to give an empirically founded and holistic framework to illustrate how actors use, interpret, and translate social media into their local organizational contexts by initiatives they orchestrate. Moreover, the model concept is used to describe the potential outcome and processes emerging from the social constituting of the actors’ use and interpretation and recurring engagement with social media in organizational contexts. Finally, the models are used to create a solid user perspective on the use of social media in organizations.

Therefore, the research objective is to contextualize how a *single* Internet technology – and its embedded ideas – is used and interpreted by *four* defined actors, who interact in *two* different organizational contexts: in a *K-12 education system* and in a *public administration*. The four actors are affiliated to *three* different organizations, which are given pseudonyms. Each case story explores how each local model is connected to the uses and interpretations carried out by the actors and connected to the correct organization and organizational context they belong to. Each model is also analyzed in light of relevant organizational tendencies, institutional logics and practices, and initiatives linked to social media or ICT. This is done to illustrate the dynamics and depth of the models.

The four case stories have diverse scopes and backdrops, which are outlined in the next sections. The actors, models, and organizations are displayed in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Overview of actors, organizations, and local models.

No.	Actor	Local Model	Pseudonym	Organization	Organizational Context	Perspective	Year
1.	Students	Shadow Student Learning Ecology	The Alfa Organization	High school	K-12 Education System	Bottom-up	2012
2.	Teacher	Authentic Learning Situations					2011-12
3.	Beta Group	Relation Platforms	The Echo Organization	City Municipality	Public Administration	Top-down	2008-12
4.	Employees	2.0 Social Intranet Portal	The Lima Organization	County Authority			2013-14

The student case story: The Shadow Student Learning Ecology

The first case story describes the study’s first local model, the *shadow student learning ecology*. This is told through what I call the *student case story*. The student case story examines how social media is used, interpreted, and imported into an *educational context* by actions and initiatives carried out by learners. The learners are the study’s “Actor number 1”. The case story is exemplified by analyzing social media uses and practices among a group of *high school students*, attending either their first and last year at a high school, which I have named the “Alfa Organization”. The student case story uses a bottom-up perspective to portray how the students take the initiative and use social media to organize formal and informal learning activities, which is facilitated by but contradicts a national educational measure aimed at boosting their digital competence.

Since the 2000s, Norwegian students and teachers attending high schools have been equipped with laptops with direct access to the Internet. The laptops are intended to follow the students throughout their studies. But teachers experience that such measures do not meet with the expected outcomes. Teachers see that students socialize and use the leisure activities offered by the social media universe, often taking place *in* the classroom. These student practices cause disputes over the intention of having technology condensed learning environments. Teachers argue that the students’ social media activities are distractions, claiming that they result in obstructing the formal learning the teachers attempt to initiate. This means that students’ uses of social media are evaluated as contradictory with educational views on technology and learning. In order to regain control, many high schools with laptop initiatives attempt to limit students’ social media use by installing filters on social media.

The students in the student case story attended a high school with a laptop initiative, which had implemented a technical filter preventing student use of Facebook. In spite of this, the case story reports how the students take the initiative to create and administer Facebook groups, which they use to fulfill formal learning activities. On them, the students post practical information on homework and share cram sheets, or use them as discussion forums when working on school projects. The students use Skype as a means to con their homework, and they co-write school assignments in Google Docs. The students also use YouTube tutorials for

informal learning activities, to maintain and develop their hobbies, like learning to play a musical instrument, to play computer games and to improve their photographic skills. The outcomes of the ways in which the students use social media to organize formal and informal learning activities emerge holistically into a local form of organizing, resembling an autonomous learning ecology that is an off-limits site for teachers – which is organized in “the shadows” of a learning institution.

The teacher case story: Authentic Learning Situations

The second case story describes how social media is used, imported, and interpreted into an *educational context*. The case story narrates an educator’s learning design for working professionally with social media in foreign language teaching, which a digital literate female teacher called *authentic learning situations*. This is the study’s second local model. To show its dynamics, this is described through what I call the *teacher case story*. This is a personalized account about a female language teacher, working part-time at the same high school as the students, the “Alfa Organization”. The female language teacher is the study’s “Actor number 2”. I use a bottom-up perspective to analyze the work practice of a proficient social media user who is an early adopter in her field.

During the school year 2011/12, the teacher taught two classes twice a week, a vocational class in English and a Spanish class in academic studies. The teacher aimed to create curriculum-based classes organized around the use of social media, implying an attempt to decouple from a print technology that has defined the identity of the teaching profession for decades, the textbook. This involved motivating her students to learn a foreign language by using social relations and information accessed via the World Wide Web as a source of knowledge and by regularly working with social media software. This initiative contradicts the teaching and learning methods commonly practiced by teachers, but aligns with an educational goal of enhancing digital competence set by the educational authorities. The case story focuses on *structure* and *process*. I map the strategies behind the teacher’s learning design and I try to capture the *implementation* and *enacting* of the model and to establish recursive patterns from her actions, involving focus on *results*, and *experiences*, and the *adjustments* the teacher had to perform when implementing her learning design. To illustrate it, I tracked the progress of her classes monthly from August 2011 to March 2012, taking a longitudinal perspective on social media use.

The beta group case story: Relation Platforms

The third case story moves to a new organizational context and considers how social media is used and interpreted in *public administrations*. The case story is called the *beta group case story*. The case story examines how a loose cluster of municipal employees took the initiative to form a social media competence group, a *beta*, which is called the Beta Group (BG, a pseudonym). The municipal employees work in a city municipality, which is called the “Echo Organization”. The BG members created their own definition of social media which forms the study’s third local model, *relation platforms*. The BG members are the study’s “Actor number 3”. This case story uses a bottom-up perspective to analyze the work practices of a group of proficient social media users who are also early adopters in their field.

The case story establishes a process approach and tracks the history and activities carried out by the BG from the fall of 2008 to the spring of 2012, illustrating how employees in organizations are starting to work professionally with social media and build specialized knowledge around it. During this period, the BG members began engaging with a variety of

social media platforms and started to examine a range of social media software, which they systematically reviewed and tested internally in the city municipality. These activities contributed to the creation of their own definition of social media which they called “relation platforms based on user-generated content”. The BG members authored the municipal guidelines for use of social media fitted to an organizational context. The definition and guidelines are the result of self-initiated research, experimentation, and reflection on their own practice and use of social media. A knowledge production process occurred that has been subject to changes as the group has interacted with ongoing priorities, goals, and activities in the municipal organization where they work. The definition and guidelines consist of adopted symbols and expressions from the contemporary web culture and are part of a genre repertoire on how employees can use and embed social media into their work practices, forming an organizational literacy in social media. The case story examines events in the BG’s history which have played a role in the knowledge production process leading to their self-created definition of social media. This case story has a longitudinal perspective on social media use.

The social intranet portal case story: 2.0 Social Intranet Portal

The fourth case story analyzes how social media is translated and interpreted in a public organization. This case story is called the *social intranet case story*. The case story investigates the decision of top management in a public administration or County Authority (CA), which I have named the Lima Organization, to implement a new intranet. This consisted of upgrading its older intranet and turning it into a social intranet by embedding a variety of technical features enabling information sharing, modeling it to be similar to an internal professional enterprise SNS like Yammer. The social intranet was acquired through public procurement and implemented and organized as part of an internal project. The goal was to improve internal communications, simplify employees’ work surface, escape e-mail burden, and contribute to bridging gaps across internal organizational boundaries, as part of a goal to bring organizational change and development within the CA. Another goal, however, was the promotion of an organizational discourse stressing the importance of *sharing* content on the new social intranet and legitimizing a *sharing culture*. This implied that employees needed to be encouraged to change their communication and work practices, by transferring their private work interaction from e-mail to increasingly sharing work and communicating on the social intranet. Although technical implementation went well, the top management later perceived that sharing was not occurring at an expected level as employees were reluctant to engage and share.

To analyze one side of this situation, the case story tracks how the initiative is interpreted and what meaning sharing and sharing culture acquire, by using a top-down perspective. The case story attempts to show how embedded ideas linked to social media are socially constituted and translated into an organizational context. This creates the dissertation’s fourth local model, the *2.0 Social Intranet Portal*. This is described by analyzing the user experiences of a group of employees holding different positions in the Lima Organization. The employees are the study’s “Actor number 4”. The case story pays attention to their different levels of involvement in the implementation of the social intranet and how they negotiate boundaries and define performance of their roles. I pay attention to how the employees interpret the social intranet and the meaning of sharing and how they relate that to their use of the social intranet.

1.2 Research questions

The dissertation has a main research question which connects to understanding the ways social media is adopted and implemented in organizations.

The main research question is: *How is social media interpreted, used, and classified, and what kinds of new practices can we identify in the public sector?*

This main research question is addressed by reformulation into four questions:

1. How do actors evaluate, classify, and define social media in organizational contexts in which they interact?
2. What types of user patterns can we find?
3. To what extent is use of social media congruent with organizational practice?
4. In what ways do social media challenge organizations?

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The dissertation consists of eight chapters. This introduction is **Chapter 1**. Here, I explain the background to the study, the research objective, and the four case stories, and establish the research questions.

Chapter 2 outlines the *research approach*. I address the methods and research strategies I have used to complete this study. **Chapter 3** establishes the *research perspective*. I outline the analytical perspective, key concepts, and the relevant research horizon I have used to analyze the four case stories.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 make up the *data analysis* part. The data analysis chapters follow the same structure and rely on contextualization. Each chapter introduces a relevant and separate key theoretical concept, which is used to analyze the individual *case stories* and frame their respective models. Each chapter contextualizes the organization and initiative, before pursuing and analyzing the social media user experiences of each actor. **Chapters 4 and 5** empirically analyze the uses and practices of social media in an educational context. **Chapter 4** accounts for the *student case story* and the local model, the *Shadow Student Learning Ecology*. **Chapter 5** expands on the educational context, but uses a teacher perspective to describe the second local model, *Authentic Learning Situation*. **Chapters 6 and 7** move on to the second organizational context and describe the uses, practices and ideas of social media in public administrations. **Chapter 6** analyzes the third local model, *Relation Platforms*, and examines the *beta group case story*. **Chapter 7** builds on the previous context and analyzes the fourth local model, *2.0 Social Intranet Portal* and focuses on the *social intranet case story*.

Chapter 8 is the conclusion. This chapter draws together the overall research results and establishes the dissertation's contributions to research.