



**Research Seminar**  
**Department of Information Systems**

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**The Question Concerning Best  
Practices**

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# Overview

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- About 'best practices'
- Are they 'harmful'?
- How should they be handled?
- An approach based on an organizational reference model
- Application to a case study of 'best practice' implementation at a US university
- A second case study: The World Summit Awards – a global contest for selecting and promoting the world's best e-contents and applications
- In conclusion ...

# About 'Best Practices'

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- 'Best practices' are normally identified through surveys of select firms that are judged (by the surveyor) to have achieved superior performance in a particular domain, such as, for example, the use of Customer Relationship Management systems

# About 'Best Practices'

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- The implicit assumption is therefore that a practice can be described through a number of explicit characteristics – initiatives or organisations that exhibit a high number of these characteristics thus come to represent the best practice within a domain

# About 'Best Practices'

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- This view of 'best practice' contains the germ of what Bourdieu calls the 'substantialist fallacy': the notion that a 'practice' has substantial properties that can be transferred from firm to firm within one society and culture, and even to another culture

# About 'Best Practices'

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- The idea of identifying and holding up 'best practices' is a favourite activity of market research organizations feeding executives what they are desperately looking for: ways to improve their firm's competitive edge, or regaining ground lost to a competitor.

# About 'Best Practices'

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- **Best practice cases are commonly presented in their end-result, or outcome, state.**
- **Thus the outcome is shown without making substantial reference to the process – the 'practice', which was followed to achieve the outcome.**

# About 'Best Practices'

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- In a recent study, Wagner *et al.* found that “while literature exists on best practices, the process of arriving at them is not considered to any extent.
- Instead, “these actions are black-boxed and assumed.” Then, when best practices are implemented in projects, “these black-boxed practices get deconstructed through use. They are then reconstructed and take on a hybrid form; the prescribed, generic processes become infused with local value.”



# About 'Best Practices'

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- Organizations seek out 'best practices', and individuals emulate 'models' in an attempt to find a technique or method that has worked for someone else and copy it.
- Leaving out for the moment that such imitation may simply not work because your situation is fundamentally different, and leaving out the fact that the results achieved by a particular model don't come from imitation, copying has many pitfalls

# About 'Best Practices'

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- Copying confuses the outcome with the process, and *disregards that the process may be the outcome you are seeking.* Copying is like buying a room full of books to become educated – simply because highly educated people often have many books
- Copying can stifle motivation, and can never – never, never, never – produce renewal (William Bridges)

# Problems with 'Best Practices'

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- Clearly, there are several problems with the way 'best practices' are conceptualized and treated by organizations.
- First, the very idea that a 'best practice' can be described through a few characteristics identified through industry surveys is misguided. Practices embody human competence and are the (ever refined) result of an ongoing learning process. They cannot be captured at any point, even if just to state that this represents the current best practice.

# Problems with 'Best Practices'

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- Second, the belief that such captured 'best practices' can be transplanted to achieve the results they ostensibly have achieved elsewhere assumes an independent existence of the 'best practice' as an object that can be manipulated.

# Problems with 'Best Practices'

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- Third, the idea that the transplanted 'best practice' will take root in its new environment as a matter of course – perhaps tended to by an independent 'gardener' (the consultant) – ignores the very nature of 'growing' a best practice through an ongoing (organizational) learning process.

# Are they 'harmful'?

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- At its core, the concept of 'best practices' can be well intended, enabling the sharing of learned lessons and helping people and organisations not to reinvent the wheel or make the same mistakes as others
- But to ensure that the expected benefits are realised, best practice cases should provide *ample evidence of practice*, and not only of outcome

# Are they 'harmful'?

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- In spite of all such objections one has to realize that the appeal of best practices will perpetuate the concept and its erroneous treatment by market research organizations, consultants and organizations in general.

# Are they 'harmful'?

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- Thus, it would not achieve very much to cry foul and advocate the abolishment of the concept. In fact, much of individual learning and organizational learning consists of imitating the behaviour of others, and as such the idea of observing what successful others have done is sound.
- We should therefore attempt to find a way of dealing with the 'how' of 'best practices', not the 'what'.



# How should they be handled?

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- It is proposed that ‘best practices’, or rather their (successful) introduction into an organization, should be seen as a classical adoption and diffusion problem
- Naturally, it is not proposed to approach this through classical (Rogerian) diffusion theory

# How should they be handled?

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- McMaster *et al.* have ridiculed the classical (Rogerian) theory of innovations quite explicitly: “...[an innovation] mysteriously ... begins to diffuse throughout society, largely intact and unchanging, and propelled by the power of its own self-evident factuality – like a bolt from *Mjollnir* flying straight from the Halls of Asgard right into the world of an unsuspecting and hitherto ignorant humanity.”

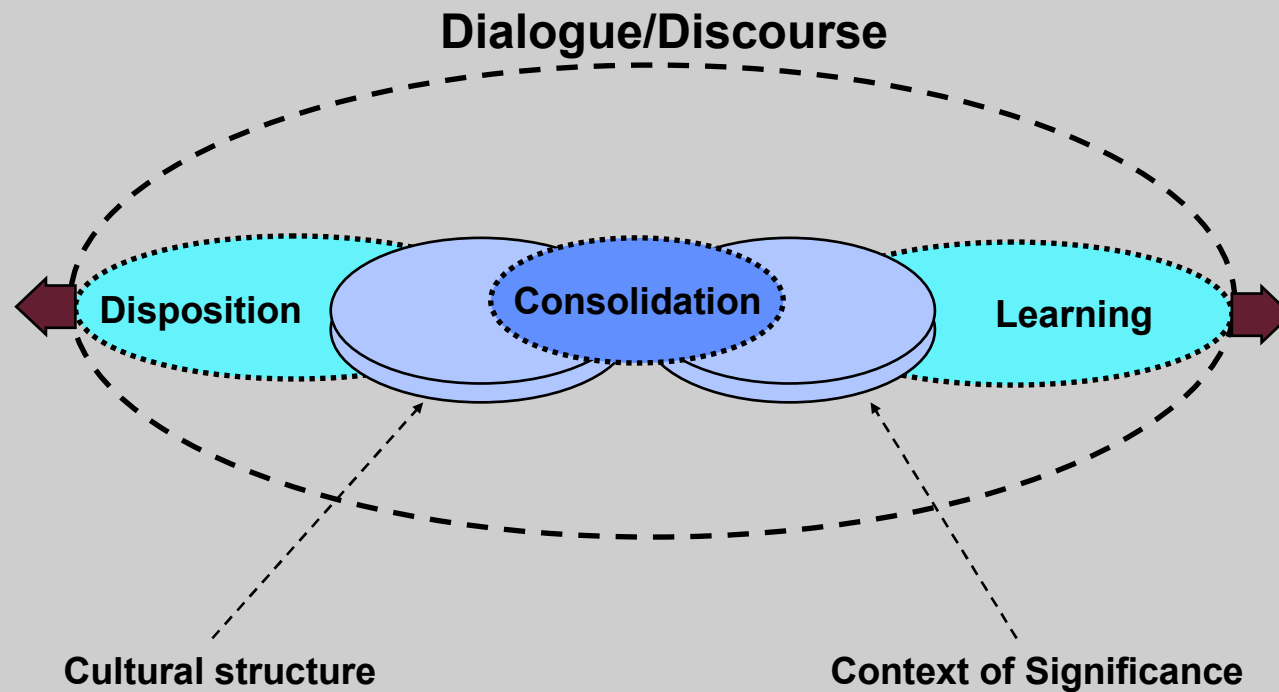
# How should they be handled?

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- Alternatives:
  - The organizational learning model
  - A power relations viewpoint (ANT)
  - The Due Process Model
  - The Human Environment Model
  - ➡ An approach based on O'Donovan's\* organizational reference model

# Organizational Reference Model

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# The cohesive whole of the organization

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- Two constitutive structures
  - Cultural structure
  - Context of significance

# Organizational Reference Model

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- The cohesive whole of the organization is a totality which emerges from and integrates the two constitutive structures of the organization. The two structures or components are simultaneously irreducible to one another and non-separable in the whole.

# Organizational Reference Model

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- **Cultural Structure**
  - It incorporates culture in the customs and practices that develop over time and provide a web of collectively accepted meanings and assumptions. They become the frame of reference underlying the perceptions, interpretations, understandings and communications of the members of the organization
  - It also incorporates structure in the way the members undertake their day-to-day activities and interact accountably, guided by common norms, conventions and rules, and the currently accepted distributions of power

# Organizational Reference Model

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- **Context of Significance**
  - The organization's context of significance – a context of things and people – reflects the ongoing activities which are pertinent to the achievement of organizational purposes and which result in the accomplishment of common goals and interests
  - The context of significance is only made intelligible against the background of the organization's cultural structure



# Organizational Reference Model

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- While the cultural structure of the organization is peculiar to the organization, it is embedded in and is influenced by the conventions and norms of successively greater and more fundamental backgrounds of the business world, and of the world itself
- It is therefore influenced by changes in that context
- Similarly, members introduce new ways of doing things, and this, through the recursive relationship between the context of significance and the cultural structure, influence and change the cultural structure

# Organizational Reference Model

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- The coherent whole of the organization is therefore not static but changes gradually over time
- Heidegger's four ways of being show how the organization, in its current, settled way of being, changes

# The first way of being

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- **Consolidation (‘*Verfallen*’)** is an essential way of being as it results in consistency and competence in executing the activities of the organization
- **Consolidation** holds together the already existing norms, conventions, standards and smooth work procedures and removes the necessity for the individual member to discover these each time anew

# The first way of being

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- Consolidation does not preclude the possibility of change
- Change opens up new challenges and opportunities, although it can also pose threats to the organization
- The seeking and evaluation of opportunities for change take place in a dialectic manner in which the consolidated organization and the forces for change interact
- The first force for change is Learning – the second way of being (*‘Verstehen’*)

# The second way of being

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- If learning does not take place in an organization, it cannot be expected that any of the opportunities for change will be discovered or exploited, or that effective measures will be developed to counter threats to the organization
- The result would be a stagnated organization – a form of Consolidation – in which the members become lost in the unchanging and comfortable present

# The second way of being

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- Learning requires the members of the organization to stop and reflect in order to modify their understandings and to restructure their activities
- Learning is a reflective process which requires members to seek what Heidegger terms 'breakdown'
- Breakdown can be seen as the interrupted moment of our habitual, standard, comfortable 'being-in-the-world'
- It results in a focus on finding new ways to go about things

# The third way of being

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- When faced with possible changes to ongoing activities, the members of the organization have certain attitudes or attunements to these changes
- Heidegger terms this *Befindlichkeit*, derived from the everyday greeting *Wie befinden Sie sich?*
- There are many different translations of this; here we call the third way of being organizational Disposition

# The third way of being

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- Disposition may be described as that which we find ourselves *in*, when we suddenly stop to take notice
- We *always* find ourselves *in* something, entangled in a host of situations, predicaments, opportunities, etc – this is our *Befindlichkeit*
- Organizational disposition is not a state of mind; it is not the additive combination of individual dispositions, but the common moods of the members which are reflected from the organizational world rather than from introspection



# The third way of being

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- Through these moods, organizational disposition attunes the members' tacit awareness of the nature of change and 'informs' them of appropriate responses to this change
- Organizational disposition is thus a way of being which affects members' understanding of the nature of changes to activities
- It is the prevailing organizational common sense

# The third way of being

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- Possibilities or opportunities that threaten to disrupt the status quo will cause a form of breakdown
- This brings to the fore the innate dispositions of the members, who will be disposed to resist changes that do not appear to serve their interests
- They may endeavour to influence the process to increase their own power or to better achieve their sub-goals rather than those of others or of the organization itself

# The fourth way of being

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- It is the fourth way of being, Dialogue (*'Rede'*), that can facilitate the process of resolving these reactions and gaining acceptance of change
- Dialogue is a process of allowing issues to be raised, discussed and questioned
- It is also a process of sharing attitudes, feelings, reactions and discomforts with others to uncover a common disposition
- Dialogue's purpose is to overcome incoherence, fragmentation, and polarities, and is thus directed towards re-articulating the coherent whole of the organization

# The dynamics of change

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- The four ways of being and the cohesive whole of the organization allow the following description of the dynamics of change in the organization:
- Consolidation is the organization as it is at present.
- Pulling in a backward direction is organizational disposition. This reflects those past experiences of the members which have crystallized their disposition towards current activities and changes to those activities.

*continue ...*

# The dynamics of change

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- Pulling in a forward direction is organizational learning which describes the way members discover possibilities for change.
- Holding these three ways of being together is dialogue (or organizational discourse) through which the members pursue an awareness and an understanding of new possibilities. Dialogue also opens up and clarifies the attitudes and emotions of disposition and thus facilitates change. Ineffective dialogue or lack of dialogue reinforces convergence or the *status quo*.

# Supporting the adoption and diffusion of a 'best practice'

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- Using the organizational reference model, the adoption and eventual diffusion of a best practice in an organization can be supported by using two 'instruments', which are simple templates

# Supporting the adoption and diffusion of a 'best practice'

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ADOPTION		Best Practice	Organizational Learning
Cultural Structure	Consolidation		
Context of Significance	Disposition		
Organizational Discourse			

# Supporting the adoption and diffusion of a 'best practice'

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- The next template assists the organization to see the current organizational disposition in relation to the 'best practice', and to document the organizational reactions triggered in response to the adopted 'best practice'
  - Such triggered reactions could be rejection and failure, resistance and modification, or acceptance and commitment



# Supporting the adoption and diffusion of a 'best practice'

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DIFFUSION		Best Practice	Triggered Reactions
Context of Significance	Organizational Disposition		
Organizational Discourse			

# Supporting the adoption and diffusion of a 'best practice'

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- These templates can be seen as an analyst's tools – analysing after the fact what had happened during adoption and diffusion
- In fact, that's what we as researchers do: telling people afterwards what had gone wrong and perhaps why
- The tools can, however, be used in a normative way: to steer the organization towards successful adoption and diffusion of a 'best practice'

# **A case study of ‘best practice’ implementation at a US university\***

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- **The attempt of a leading US university, IVY, to design, in collaboration with an international software vendor VISION, an ERP product intended to represent the embodiment of best practice in academic administration**
- **VISION’s intent was to subsequently sell this to the international market as a global standard**

<b>ADOPTION</b>		<b>Best Practice</b>	<b>Org. Learning</b> (Opportunities or requirements for)
<p><b>Cultural Structure</b> Research money accounting is a supportive process of the main academic processes – teaching and research</p>	<p><b>Consolidation</b> Grant accounting system has worked successfully for many years – a stagnated organization, comfortable in its way of doing things</p>	<p>VISION was interested in developing a strategic partnership with IVY to create a standard ERP package that would be sold internationally Required contextual expertise to define patterns of use associated with university best practices, and to design this into the ERP system for IVY Design principle of centralized control</p>	<p>Disadvantages of the legacy system Why it was necessary to move towards integrated accounting Advantages of the new approach How the changeover would be handled</p>
<p><b>Context of Significance</b> Independent control of grant funds</p>	<p><b>Disposition</b> IVY users expressed resistance to the proposed system Faculty felt that the project team were purposefully designing their preferences out of the ERP system in order to assert central control over faculty research accounting</p>		
<p align="center"><b>Organizational Discourse</b></p> <p>When this project started they told us it was going to make our lives easier Why change something that isn't broken? They take nearly 30% of my grant money in indirect costs so they can administer my money and ...the system doesn't give me any of the answers I need to manage my projects They let the bean counters run wild so the next thing you know they've designed grant accounting based on some textbook budgeting trend (From an IVY champion of the project): I would say that the mentality that we've had for managing is primitive to say the least</p>			

## DIFFUSION

## Best Practice

## Triggered Reactions

### Context of Significance

Legacy system not available anymore  
No relationship with Transaction Support Centre staff  
Faculty not able to read their grant reports

### Organizational Disposition

Faculty members and their staff were frustrated that a business-oriented rationale had been prescribed by the project team without consultation  
They felt insulted that their grant accounting functionality was not prioritized in the 'best practice' design

Three courses of action:

- Mainframe legacy system would run until ERP functionality was created
  - ERP team would meet faculty's requirements by designing legacy elements into the system
  - Two interim transaction support centres would be staffed with clerical workers acting as boundary objects
- Yet, when second action above was done, the mainframe legacy system was turned off

Emergence of Excel-based shadow systems, importing data from the customized legacy system bolted onto the ERP accounting module  
Trust developed in the Transaction Support Centres, and more and more faculty and administrators requested the TSC staff to do their reconciliations  
Administrators were becoming further entrenched in their legacy accounting practices since they were able to maintain their preferred work practices

## Organizational Discourse

No university we know of is using the method as implemented in the IVY-VISION ERP

By making a decision to go with VISION, senior management was making it impossible for IVY to continue doing business in fragmented silos. Like it or not, you've got to work with a new way of accounting. It's integrated, it's slower, it's a pain in the ass.

Faculty aren't using the ERP and what we have is a very expensive data repository, and still a lot of silos of micro-computing

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# **A Case Study**

## **The World Summit Awards: A Critical Analysis**

**From a paper presented with Steve Vosloo at  
ECIS 2006 in Göteborg, Sweden**

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# What is the WSA?

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- Global contest for selecting and promoting the world's best e-contents and applications
- Held in the framework of and in cooperation with the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)
- The winning e-content and applications are presented as examples of best practices
- There has been two complete rounds, in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005

# What is the WSA?

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- **“WSA places its emphasis on cultural diversity and identity, the creation of varied information content and the digitalization of educational, scientific and cultural heritage. It aims not only to make the benefits of the new Information Society accessible and meaningful for all humanity, but in particular to raise public awareness and give deserved public recognition to the highest quality e-Content, produced all over the world. WSA strongly aims to encourage openness towards different cultures and to support the exchange of local best practice examples by and within its international network. It sees the bridging of the digital divide and narrowing of the content gap as its overall goal.”**
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# What is the WSA?

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- Initial selection round: national experts select the best e-content product from their country in eight categories: e-learning, e-culture, e-science, e-government, e-health, e-business, e-entertainment and e-inclusion

# What is the WSA?

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- In 2003, this resulted in the nomination of 803 projects which were evaluated in a three-round judging process by the WSA Grand Jury, meeting in Dubai from October 17-22. It brought together national experts from 36 countries, representing all continents and a diverse range of languages and cultures
- In 2005, 742 projects were nominated and were again evaluated in a three-round judging process by the WSA Grand Jury, this time consisting of 37 experts, most of them selected from the members of the 2005 Expert Panel by the WSA Board of Directors.

# What is the WSA?

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- In 2003 and in 2005, 40 winners were selected (five in each category).
- Selection of the winners by the Grand Jury is based on details given in the application form, which only allows for a very limited amount of information, and the following criteria that are applied against the actual e-content products:
  - quality and comprehensiveness of content; ease of use, including functionality, navigation and orientation; value added through interactivity and multimedia; quality of design (aesthetic value of graphics / music or sounds); quality of craftsmanship (technical realisation); strategic importance for the global development of the Information Society; and accessibility to users with disabilities

# What is the WSA?

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- The process through which a nominated entry was conceptualized, its overcoming of particular obstacles, and how it came into its final, submitted form is not evaluated by the Grand Jury
- They have insufficient information to do this at their disposal, and neither does any of the evaluation criteria focus on these issues

# What is the WSA?

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- In the 2003 round of the competition, the winners were publicised on the WSA website and descriptions of them printed in a book, both in English only
- The 2005 winners are already published on the WSA website, however, for each winner only the title of the project and the individual/organisation behind it are displayed, along with a URL, thumbnail screenshot and a very brief description
- Thus, to gain access to the winner information, one must be able to read English and, unless you can get a copy of the book, have Internet access.

# What is the WSA?

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- WSA further publicises the winners through a worldwide Best Content Road Show in all of the major world regions on invitation and in cooperation with local key partners
- In 2004, WSA Road Shows were conducted in over 20 countries. The next sequence of events started in November 2005, after the winners of the WSA 2005 had been officially announced and celebrated at the Winners Gala in Tunis

# What is the WSA?

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- Organizations and individuals from all over the world are invited to become partners of the global WSA initiative and conduct WSA Road Show events in their own country
  - While these road shows have the potential to disseminate information about the process behind the showcased best practice examples, it would not seem to happen in practice. Event organizers are encouraged to have a World Best Content Exhibition as part of an existing national/international event, conference, or exhibition. The 2004-2005 WSA Road Show Report provides details about the 20 national events and in most cases, the WSA component consisted of an exhibition booth.
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# Critical analysis of the WSA

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- What are the explicit and implicit assumptions and expectations on which the WSA are based?
- The WSA view of best practices, the WSA process and their stated views on e-content provided the context within which these assumptions and expectations were embedded to undertake the critical analysis
- Our own biases



# Critical analysis of the WSA

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- **Critical discourse analysis of several texts selected from the WSA website**
- **The criteria used for the selection of the different texts were simply that we chose those that revealed, in our opinion, most about the underlying assumptions and expectations of the various actors**

# Assumptions and Expectations of the WSA

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- The WSA represents expert opinions. WSA winners really are the best e-content products in the world and therefore must represent best practices
  - The application form, combined with the e-content product itself, adequately captures the best practice characteristics of a submission. This allows the panel of experts to legitimately recognize it as a quality e-content initiative.
  - Quality e-content and best practices are exchangeable concepts
  - Focusing on the outcome of a best practice case provides sufficient substance for it to be easily shared and be of benefit to others
  - The WSA process is sound in identifying and facilitating the exchange of best practices by showcasing quality e-content products
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# Discussion

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- **The WSA selection process and dissemination of best practice e-contents is based on outcome, on the end product. The key issues, processes and context needed to fully describe a local content initiative are not conveyed in the current WSA process and presentation of the winners.**

# Discussion

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- **With reference to the earlier discussion on how an organization (here, also a community) could support the adoption and diffusion of a best practice, it is clear that the WSA does not provide the information that is necessary for such a support process**

# Discussion

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- There is an inherent belief that by showcasing what is possible with ICTs, the WSA makes a contribution to closing the digital divide and content gap. But given the process of the WSA, the contribution can only be in terms of raising awareness and creating a vision for current and aspiring content producers by showing them what their e-content could and should look like.

# Discussion

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- Disseminating best practices assumes a high-degree of homogeneity between the organisations of the intended audience, but the WSA emphasises and celebrates diversity. The WSA presents the winners in sectors, e.g., e-government, but their only commonality, aside from sharing a sector, is that they are local content initiatives that use ICTs. It is a highly heterogeneous group, differentiated by factors such as geographic location, local culture, language, audience profiles, etc.

# Conclusions

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- The WSA is fundamentally flawed
  - The WSA does not provide enough information on the process behind each of its best practice cases, which limits the ability of others to support the adoption and diffusion of these very good examples in their environment.
  - It does not provide what Titilayo Akinsanmi, spokesperson for Africa, hopes for in WSA: “...building adaptation skills, by addressing language issues, ...by engaging in joint action on content development and by strengthening the local skills base”
  - The WSA is another example of the socio-techno divide that manifests itself between the grass roots, community level, and the technocratic level (in this case, the WSA organization)
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# In conclusion ...

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- If we hope to have an impact on the world of practice, we should provide tools that can be used to implement improved ways of working
- That means that we have to devise tools based on things like the Organizational Reference Model, the Due Process Model, the Human Environment Model, ANT, Structuration Theory, etc., that would assist practitioners pro-actively to do things better, and not just to be told by us, afterwards, how (and perhaps why) things had failed