

# Cultivating Communities of Practice: From Institutions to Practices

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Where do communities of practice (CoPs) come from? What relationship do they entertain with institutions within or across which they develop? To what extent can institutions actually create CoPs? These questions are crucial, if only because of the benefits that CoPs are expected to bring, from innovation to learning to shared best practices. This article suggests that the most important relationship is between the CoP and its founding practice, which is ontologically prior to the CoP. The coming into existence of a CoP thus depends on the pre-existence of a founding practice and practical alignments. This argument counterbalances the two prevailing positions in the literature on CoPs, which focus on institutions instead of practices. In most IR literature on the topic, scholars have viewed CoPs as emerging “organically” and informally at the margins of institutions in a bottom-up fashion and from there often coming back to influence institutions bottom-up. Knowledge management scholars and institutional actors themselves have instead embraced a more agential and performative top-down approach by which CoPs can and should be cultivated to foster knowledge creation in business and international institutions alike. The article explores these positions with the help of examples drawn mainly from the European Union’s experience, including the Joint Research Centre’s attempt to cultivate CoPs from 2016 onwards.

D’où viennent les communautés de pratiques (CDP) ? Quelles sont leurs relations avec les institutions au sein ou au travers desquelles elles se développent ? Dans quelle mesure les institutions peuvent-elles réellement créer des CDP ? Ces questions ont reçu beaucoup d’intérêt, dans le but de confirmer les avantages attendus des CDP, de l’innovation à l’apprentissage en passant par le partage des bonnes pratiques. Cet article suggère que la relation la plus importante est celle qui unit la CDP à sa pratique fondatrice, qui la précède ontologiquement. Aussi l’avènement d’une CDP dépend-il de la préexistence d’une pratique fondatrice et d’alignements pratiques. Cet argument s’inscrit en contrepoids des deux positions dominantes de la littérature relative aux CDP, qui se concentrent sur les institutions plutôt que les pratiques. Dans la majorité de la littérature qui traite de ce sujet en RI, les chercheurs estiment que les CDP apparaissent « de façon organique » et informelle, en marge des institutions et selon une approche ascendante. Elles influencent ensuite ces mêmes institutions par le bas. Les chercheurs en gestion des connaissances et les acteurs institutionnels eux-mêmes ont adopté une approche descendante plus agentielle et performative dans laquelle les CDP peuvent et devraient être cultivées pour encourager la création de connaissances dans les entreprises comme les institutions internationales. L’article examine ces positions avec l’aide d’exemples issus principalement de l’expérience de l’Union européenne (UE), y compris la tentative du Centre commun de recherche de culture de CDP à partir de 2016.

¿De dónde proceden las comunidades de práctica (CoP, por sus siglas en inglés)? ¿Qué relación mantienen estas con las instituciones dentro, o a través, de las cuales se desarrollan? ¿Hasta qué punto pueden realmente las instituciones llegar a crear CoP? Estas preguntas han estado atrayendo una gran atención, con el objetivo de desarrollar el conocimiento acerca de los beneficios que se espera que aporten las CoP, y que van desde la innovación hasta el aprendizaje y las mejores prácticas compartidas. Este artículo sugiere que la relación más importante es aquella que tiene lugar entre la CoP y su práctica fundacional, la cual es ontológicamente anterior a la CoP. Por lo tanto, la existencia de una CoP depende de la preexistencia de una práctica fundacional, así como de alineaciones prácticas. Este argumento contrarresta las dos posiciones predominantes en la literatura sobre las CoP, las cuales se centran en las instituciones en lugar de centrarse en las prácticas. En la mayor parte de la literatura del ámbito de las RRI sobre este tema, los académicos han percibido a las CoP como elementos que emergen «orgánicamente» y de manera informal, en los márgenes de las instituciones de manera ascendente y, los cuales, a partir de ahí, regresan, a menudo, con el fin de influir en las instituciones desde abajo hacia arriba. Los académicos dentro del campo de la Gestión del Conocimiento, así como los propios agentes institucionales, han adoptado un enfoque más activo y performativo de arriba hacia abajo mediante el cual las CoP pueden y deben cultivarse con el fin de fomentar la creación de conocimiento tanto en las empresas como en las instituciones internacionales. El artículo estudia estas posiciones con la ayuda de ejemplos extraídos principalmente de la experiencia de la Unión Europea (UE), incluyendo el intento por parte del Centro Común de Investigación de poner en marcha CoP a partir de 2016.

## Introduction

When Lave and Wenger published their seminal work (1991) on communities of practice (CoPs), they did not address in any depth where CoPs come from. Their focus was on learning, and the main finding they put forward was that it happened in CoPs. CoPs were seen as interwoven with the practice they shared, and this was the environment within which learning occurred. The many touted benefits of CoPs, however, soon attracted the attention of public and private institutional actors, keen to create CoPs in order

to ripen their advantages. A later publication by Wenger also raised the issue of how to cultivate CoPs (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). The attention in much of the debate thus shifted away from the key and delicate relationship between a CoP and its founding practice to the more peripheral and power-laden relationship between institutions and CoPs, particularly on institutions’ role in creating CoPs. Two opposite positions emerged in the ensuing debate. Interpretative understandings of CoPs (including the literature on international relations [IR]) have

stressed informality, spontaneousness, and even subversion of institutional objectives. Performative and managerial perspectives have instead focused on specific strategies for cultivating CoPs top-down. The aim of this article is to directly tackle the issue of CoPs' origins by bringing back the focus to the key role of founding practices and practices' alignment. The article also aims to reposition the debate about institutions' role in establishing CoPs, by bringing in the importance of the CoP–practice relationship. The aim here is to achieve a better understanding of how CoPs emerge and a more nuanced view of the role institutions can play in the process.

The debate about CoPs has elicited much interest in IR in conjunction with the “practice turn” (Neumann 2002; Adler 2008; Bicchi 2011, 2022; Bueger 2013; Bueger and Gadinger 2018; Banerjee and MacKay 2020; Schulte, Andresen, and Koller 2020; Sondarjee 2021; Hofius 2023). According to practice approaches (Bueger and Gadinger 2018), CoPs best exemplify sociality in international politics. In the original formulation by Wenger, CoPs display three characteristics, which have been imported into IR literature. CoPs share a practice (e.g., cybersecurity), a common engagement forged in participating in the practice together (e.g., a sense of belonging in a cyberlab), and a set of tools developed to help in the practice's performance (e.g., specific hardware/software but also a jargon, routines, textbooks, etc.) (Wenger 2000).<sup>1</sup> IR literature has tended to be receptive to this definition, particularly in relation to the first two elements. In his seminal works, Adler defined CoPs as “like-minded groups of practitioners who are informally as well as contextually bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice” (Adler 2008, 196). Therefore, as defined in the “Introduction” section to this special forum, CoPs “make social order possible in world politics” (1) by providing a different angle from networks or fields and instead embodying the “*social fabric of relations in action*” (idem). A CoP's perspective thus spotlights how sociality impacts practices, and this happens because a CoP shares a “sense of timing, placing, and sensemaking” by which they embody specific dynamism and meaningful political phenomena (Bicchi 2022, 26). Therefore, a CoP conceptually captures that elusive “feel for the game” that is so central to the building blocks of international politics, such as security or diplomacy (Kuus 2015; Cornut 2018). In the international context, IR approaches to CoPs and CoPs creation thus tend to embrace an interpretative perspective, according to which institutions have a limited role in CoPs' emergence but are affected by CoPs' presence.

Seen from part of knowledge management literature and international institutions themselves, CoPs have a different contour, molded by a more performative/prescriptive perspective. Knowledge management has tended to consider them as a management tool, aimed at delivering better work practices and better knowledge. By drawing also on the early interest in knowledge creation (e.g., Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), a central part of knowledge management has addressed how to foster CoPs and ripen-related benefits (Probst and Borzillo 2008; North and Kumta 2020). In this vein, CoPs are a way to offset the many work-related issues created mainly by technological solutions: As datasets and IT-based approaches proved less user-friendly than anticipated, for instance, CoPs (and virtual CoPs in particular) represent the perfect match to help practitioners with similar interests access the material and share best practices (McDermott 1999). This perspective developed in dialogue

with public and private institutions themselves, which have often shown an interest in directly cultivating CoPs to improve knowledge creation and share best practices. As a consequence (and with a bit of a paradox), a new practice has emerged, namely the practice of intentionally cultivating CoPs top-down in order to ripen expected benefits. This practice (and related CoP) has grown from the 1990s onwards, not only amid business operations, but also within international institutions, which have started to intentionally establish formal “cultivated” CoPs. The World Bank has been an early adopter, whereas the European Union (EU) has pursued this goal only since 2016.

Therefore, the debate on CoPs origins shows that, while IR literature tends to embrace an interpretative perspective about CoPs creation and the role of institutions therein, knowledge management and institutions themselves have leaned toward a more performative/prescriptive approach. Put differently, whereas in much of IR literature CoP creation is a process akin to an “orchestra without a conductor” (to borrow from Bourdieu 1990, 68), what has prevailed elsewhere in the debate is a strategy of cultivating CoPs by appointing one paid conductor and using a range of techniques to bring in the musicians and have them play.

The aim of this article is to provide a fresh look to the issue of CoPs' origins, by bringing to the fore the relationship between practice and CoP. The article argues that the alignment between practical engagements is essential for the establishment of a CoP, whereas instead conflicting practices and expectations sap its mid-term chances. This argument builds on the early suggestions in the literature on CoPs, according to which the foundation of CoPs is situated in the primordial practical experience (Lave and Wenger 1991). This point is developed in this article to argue that unless there is involvement in the practice's performance and thus practice alignment, there can be no CoP (cf. Gherardi 2009). The involvement is both embodied and non-verbal, on the one hand, and verbal as in storytelling and sensemaking, on the other (Brown and Duguid 1991). On these bases, CoPs can emerge and thrive. Once emerged, CoPs then become co-constitutive of their funding practices, as they maintain practices alive in the face of uncertainty and adversities, and contribute to the diffusion of practices (Bicchi 2022). These analytical building blocks about the practice–CoPs relationship thus re-center the debate about CoPs' creation, contributing to a better insight into CoPs' dynamics.

These points will be illustrated with examples drawn mainly from the EU and Europe more generally. This institutionally thick context has been a privileged “sandbox” for many CoPs' analyses. The constant flow of negotiations and conversations that takes place within and across the EU and in contacts with non-EU countries has represented a very rich empirical material from which to draw conclusions in relation to CoPs, with generalizations brought to bear beyond the EU. Arguably, the EU is a “community of communities” (Bicchi 2011, 1119; see also Hofius 2023, 15), providing the institutional fabric that favors CoPs. Since 2016 the EU has also tried, through the Joint Research Centre, to directly promote CoPs as a working method within the European Commission and in contacts with EU member states and the broader public. Interestingly, this initiative has met with increasing difficulties, which provides further empirical evidence for better understanding the arguments presented here.

The article starts by analyzing how CoPs emerge and by defining the key role of the relationship between CoPs and their founding practices (“How to Create a CoP: Start with the Practice” section). It then moves to re-consider IR inter-

<sup>1</sup>My examples, not Wenger's.

pretative approaches postulating “organic” CoP emergence, highlighting what works and what does not work in this part of the debate (“Interpretative Approaches: CoPs as Organic, Spontaneous, Informal Entities” section). The article then analyzes the concept of cultivated, formal, and top-down CoPs put forward by knowledge management and most institutional approaches, as well as its limitations (“The Performative Approach: Cultivated, Formal, and Top-Down CoPs” section). From a methodological point of view, this selective reading of the literature is supported by empirical evidence largely drawn from secondary sources, with the exception of “The Performative Approach: Cultivated, Formal, and Top-Down CoPs” section, which includes original research on the EU’s initiative of creating CoPs through the Joint Research Centre.

### How to Create a CoP: Start with the Practice

The first step in the understanding of CoPs’ origins lies in the relationship between CoPs and their founding practices, or, more precisely, between the community and the practice that catalyzes it. In other words, a CoP emerges because of and based on a practice (maybe just an emerging one), not because of a pre-existing community that decides to embrace a practice. Practices emerge all the time, and so do CoPs. Practices emerge because of new connections between materials, competences, and meanings (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012: 14), and in response to technological developments and scientific material, in a “mangle” of sociality and materiality (Pickering 1995; Knorr-Cetina 2001). In layman’s terms, practices emerge in response to practical problems. In their wake, and compatibly with a degree of indeterminacy and creativity, CoPs also emerge, acquiring a co-constitutive role as they develop and nourish the practice in the face of adversity. In other words, no practice, no CoP—but also no CoP, no innovation in the practice (and this is what is of interest for institutionalists of all colors). Let us examine these steps in turn.

Practices are ontologically prior to CoPs, as already acknowledged in the seminal work that first introduced CoPs. Lave and Wenger specified that rather than “some primordial culture-sharing entity,” a CoP “does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (1991, 98). This foundational participation is largely pre-verbal, a sort of deep engagement that precedes verbalization. Part of the learning process analyzed by Lave and Wenger is exactly about learning the identity and to talk the talk as a consequence of participation, rather than learning “through” talk (1991, 109). Practices’ ontological priority thus shifts the emphasis. Rather than stressing the *community* of practice, the emphasis should more appropriately go to the *community of practice*. While it is relatively easy to stress the *community* of a CoP, given the word’s long pedigree and its implicit appeal to pre-industrial harmonious *Gemeinschafts*, the temptation should be resisted to avoid neutralizing the philosophical essence of practices (Nicolini 2013, 88–90). It is “practices in the community” and “the activities themselves” that “generate a community in that they form the ‘glue’ that holds together a configuration of people, artifacts, and social relations” (Gherardi 2009, 523). This explains why at times CoPs have been considered as “containers” and “vehicles” in relation to their founding practice (Adler 2019, 2).

A CoP thus emerges from its founding practice. While initial engagement in the practice is largely pre-verbal, story-

telling deserves a special place as the key to the social fabric constituting the CoP. Brown and Duguid specify that it is from the social narration of the practice that community emerges, as individuals tell stories, swap stories, and build on each other’s stories about the founding practice (Brown and Duguid 1991). The collective storytelling of practical undertakings thus represents the weaving together from which a CoP emerges. This argument exemplifies the relevance of first-hand experience and post hoc sensemaking in creating a community feeling in a vast set of empirical cases. For instance, Orr, on which Brown and Duguid’s analysis was based, analyzed the CoP composed of technicians repairing photocopying machines. He highlighted the relevance of “war stories” of everything that can go wrong and how to survive it. These stories, swapped in the cafeteria, were key to community building (Orr 1996). The CoP’s origin thus lies first in the practical pre-verbal embedment that each performance requires, and second in the storytelling that weaves the social fabric of tacit and explicit knowledge and brings post hoc sensemaking. This is a trajectory that might resonate with anyone who has found themselves “at the deep end” of a challenging activity and “survived” to tell it all, but only finding real “rapport” with people having experienced the same practical engagement.

Once a CoP does emerge, it has co-constitutive effects on the practice. This is a sensitive (and controversial) point, which nuances the previous statement about practices’ ontological priority. In later writings, Wenger suggests that practices are “the property” of CoPs (1999, 45), and both “community” and “practice” are “constituents” of CoPs (1999, 46). I have also argued that CoPs and practices are locked in a co-constitutive relationship via the “timespace” that CoPs impress to practices, which in turn has effects on sensemaking. CoPs are where practices are refined and reproduced (Bicchi 2022). This applies once the CoP has emerged and practitioners are impressing to it their creative interpretation of what the practice consists of, in the face of uncertainty and adversity. CoPs are “real, ontologically speaking” and “make things happen in the world” (Adler 2019, 112), and a key domain in which this occurs is in the practice, which evolves and possibly spreads. The shift from practices’ ontological prevalence over co-constitution between practices and CoPs is justified from a sensemaking point of view (Weick 1995), which is inescapably retrospective. The apparent linearity thus dissolves in relational cycles of “sequence, motion, implementation of recipes, chains of events, series of actions (...) narrative-like constructions with a beginning + middle + end, accomplishing, and streaming” (Weick 2015, 189)—a complexity that can be artificially resolved by analytical “stratagems” of dividing the empirical material.

There are plenty of empirical examples about CoPs’ origins being in the practice of CoP members, which clarify many aspects. Banerjee and MacKay have examined the case of two CoPs composed of military attachés in Japan and Russia at the time of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905 (Banerjee and MacKay 2020). They argue that the two CoPs emerged as the practice of military attachés spread across the world, itself a part of the globalization of Western forms of military discipline. The two CoPs provided a fundamental contribution to reassess the position of Japan and Russia in the global security hierarchy, with Japan increasing in relevance and Russia decreasing. Goff stresses the relevance of mutual engagement around the task of public diplomacy, as well as of previous meetings devoted to clarify the foundational concepts from which the UN initiative “Alliance of Civilization” was born (Goff 2015). Other cases are represented by ASEAN (Davies 2016), the South America Defense

Council (Vitelli 2017), and the spread of early warning systems (Zwolski 2016).

A crucial aspect in terms of how to create a CoP is the issue of practices' alignment. CoPs emerge as long as practitioners have shared understandings of practices. Bueger's analysis of counter-piracy exemplifies this very clearly. It is shared notions of best practices, information sharing, and training that glue together an otherwise variegated array of public and private actors drawn from different institutions: from countries contributing military equipment, to the EU, NATO, and international organizations, to private military contracts and academics. Practitioners belonging to these different institutions coalesced together into a CoP on the basis of concrete problems connected to counter-piracy and shared understandings of what to do about them (Bueger 2013). In the case of the EU foreign policy cooperation, the communication network of European Correspondents (i.e., diplomats in each EU member state and EU institution dedicated to foreign policy communications within the EU) have represented a CoP based on the practice of confidential, multilateral communications, linking all participants to the network that goes under the acronym of COREU (= *correspondence européenne*) (Bicchi 2011). The COREU technology exacted identical practices in all member states and participating EU institutions, in relation to procedures according to levels of confidentiality, tacit procedures, and forms of political compromises. New participants joining the network imported the institutionalized practices as they learn the practice in the CoP.

The point stands also in the opposite case: If practices do *not* align, it is impossible to have a CoP. For instance, Bremberg shows how the EU tried to mirror NATO expansion and spread cooperative security in the Mediterranean by reaching out to Morocco. However, providing a site (i.e., a venue where things happen) did not guarantee sufficient practical action to warrant a CoP because of practice misalignment. While "the social power of the EU as a security community-building institution lies primarily in its capacity to provide the sites of practice in which interactions between members and non-members can take place" (Bremberg 2014, 687), this fell short of establishing a shared practice. Practitioners diverged about the practice's definition (such as the legitimacy of monitoring "potential social crises," good for some but not so good according to other participants), despite EU-provided sites where practitioners could meet and discuss solutions to shared problems. As a consequence, the endeavor fostered the creation of trans-governmental networks rather than a CoP based on a shared security identity across the Mediterranean. Similarly, in the case of EU climate security, Bremberg, Sonnsjö, and Mobjörk suggest that a CoP might be in the making, but even though all practitioners belong to EU institutions, there remain substantial differences in practices of diplomacy, development, security, and defense (Bremberg, Sonnsjö, and Mobjörk 2019).

Practice alignment can develop out of practical engagement, and in turn lead to CoPs. This was a key aspect in the experience of the McKnight Foundation, for instance, which after a decade of funding projects to improve food security across the globe started sponsoring macro-regional CoPs composed of grantees (Nicklin et al. 2021). The Foundation's initial expectations were that CoPs would center around the practice of researching a specific crop or a production system. But the practice emerged instead of how to do quality research targeted at practical action (72), the specific definition of which has evolved over the years, from

participatory research to a more environmentally friendly approach.

Therefore, the first step in the emergence of a CoP resides in its founding practice (or practices in the plural, as long as alignment is taking place). Practitioners' practical involvement in a shared practice, as embodied in their doings, trainings, etc. constitutes the "compost" from which CoPs emerge—or, more specifically, *can* emerge, as an element of indeterminacy and creativity remains at the origins of every CoP. As a policy advice, this translates into an emphasis on the practice, on bringing people together to do something that is socially meaningful for them and has consequences in the real world. In other words, there is no point in calling a meeting of excellent practitioners without a clear agenda of what they are expected to do: unless they become involved in a practical engagement, their social interaction will not develop into a more lasting structure.

The remarks above clarify how the bundle practice–CoP is set into motion. They do not tackle the role that institutions/institutional actors play in this dynamic. This is a different and partly unrelated question, which can be framed like this: "Can communities of practice be harnessed, engineered, and managed like other organizational groups, or does their strength lie in the fact that they operate outside the stable and persistent social relations that characterize the organization?" (Davenport and Prusak 2000, 171). With an approximation, we can divide answers to this question between interpretative approaches, which are analyzed in the next section, and performative/prescriptive approaches, which are the subject of the following one.

### Interpretative Approaches: CoPs as Organic, Spontaneous, Informal Entities

The interpretative perspective on CoPs tends to see them as everything that institutions are not, or even a different and better label for institutions. CoPs capture the informal essence of politics and mingle sociality, adaptation, and soft hierarchy in an enduring balance. Institutions on the contrary are formal, "congealed" entities, represented by hierarchical chains of command. The early writings about CoPs assumed a nearly total separation between the institutional, hierarchical, and rule-based environment, on the one hand, and the learning process occurring in CoPs, on the other. Much of IR thinking about CoPs has embraced this route too and has contributed to further specifying the relationship between CoPs and institutions, by focusing on CoPs' effect on institutions, rather than the other way round. This interpretative approach leaves limited room for prescriptive suggestions, but paradoxically more room for success.

In the early literature on CoPs, their origin is to be found in a "highly situated and highly improvisational" context, akin to Levi-Strauss's concept of bricolage (Brown and Duguid 1991, 47). The original idea of CoPs' emergence was centered on alternatives to traditional institutional pathways to knowledge and "was specifically *not* intended as a normative or prescriptive model" (Lave 2008, 283, emphasis in the original). Lave, a Marxist social theorist, ruled out "mandated" forms of participation, in which genuine membership and legitimate access were nearly impossible. CoPs endeavored to open up new paths toward learning and new identities for learners beyond the view of the learner as an immobile recipient of the information that resided elsewhere (with masters, but also with institutions, including with IT systems). Communities thus "emerge," a process that is "opposed to being created" (Brown and Duguid

1991, 49). This original view however was guilty of not only downplaying conflict and possibly romanticizing learning in a non-hierarchical environment, but also not immediately tackling head on the efficiency-driven and profit-making environments within which most CoPs operated.

This view of CoPs as spontaneous and informal has permeated most of the IR literature on CoPs, which has been largely inspired by the “practice turn” (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001; Neumann 2002; Adler and Pouliot 2011). The concept was first explicitly mentioned by Adler (2008), and his definition of CoPs as like-minded groups of practitioners bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice has inspired scholars to devote their attention mostly to the practice and to the community, rather than to the repertoire/tools that the “shared interest” creates in the process—an element that instead is at the forefront of the literature in knowledge management, as well as in institutional policies on CoPs, as the next section will explore.

Rather than considering institutions’ role, part of practice-inspired IR literature on CoPs has focused on CoPs’ effect on institutional behavior, based on the premise that CoPs actually “do” institutions. As the beating heart of institutions, they not only support or influence them, but actually instantiate, embody, and perform much of institutions’ activities. In this perspective, any effect institutions might have over CoPs is more than offset by the influence CoPs have over institutions, which contributes to explain a wide range of institutional and political phenomena. This can explain change as well as continuity. Sondarjee, for instance, focuses on the power of small changes, particularly at the border where different CoPs meet (Sondarjee 2021). She recounts the case of the World Bank over the period 1980–2014, and how the World Bank was transformed by the introduction of participatory practices, bringing together technocratic bank fonctionnaires with civil society representatives and broad national stakeholders. As different communities came in contact, thanks to brokers, boundary encounters, and boundary objects, bank employees learned new consultation and lending practices, despite ongoing power imbalances favoring the World Bank. The slow but tangible emergence of informal and self-reinforcing encounters at the border between existing CoPs thus had a crucial influence on the institutional setting of the World Bank and its lending practices. The same finding emerged in a study of the elusive civil–military nexus, bringing together NGOs/INGOs and the military. Especially under conditions of low threat, CoPs can emerge that will allow actors from very different institutional and cultural backgrounds to cooperate in the field and effectively shape institutional practices, e.g. in delivering aid (Roberts 2010).

The EU has provided fruitful grounds for analyses of CoPs’ influence over institutions. Scholars analyzing CoPs as more informal, social, and practical arrangements both inside the EU and across EU borders have devoted attention to these dynamics in a variety of contexts: establishing institutions, maintaining them, operating outside them or even against them. The main message has been that by analyzing CoPs, it is possible to understand institutions, because institutional continuity and institutional change have similar explanations, based on the direction of travel of the CoP that is “doing” the institution. For instance, CoPs have been shown to be key for the institutionalization of collective meanings. A CoPs approach has been used to explain the peaceful transition to a post-Cold War order in Europe and NATO enlargement (Adler 2008). When new meanings, such as self-restraint, emerged and became entwined with a

community of practitioners, this led to the institutionalization of new doings, including at the formal level. In the case of the transition from a balance-of-power perspective such as the Cold War to one based on self-restraint, Central and Eastern European countries were able to acquire experience with security community practices and then to adopt practices congruent with their experience. Self-reinforcing and institutionalizing mechanisms can thus emerge from participation in a CoP. Similarly, CoPs contribute to explain institutional isomorphism and institutional continuity. In the case of ASEAN, for instance, the absence of formal change has been interpreted as harking back to well-established diplomatic practices in a shared community of practitioners (Davies 2016).

A European example illustrates also that CoPs can operate alongside institutions, overcoming their limits, even though it might not lead to institutional change directly. This is the case of EU and NATO cooperation, which is usually seen as paralyzed by the Cyprus–Turkey dispute. Græger shows a landscape of thick staff-to-staff practical cooperation on the ground, entailing operational and tactical informal cooperation in a CoP composed of EULEX and KFOR practitioners in Kosovo, despite a degree of competition among institutions’ member states (Græger 2014).

CoPs may lead to institutional change against an institution’s initial opposition. Schulte, Andresen, and Koller tracked how a CoP changed the practice of the German Federal Armed Forces (Schulte, Andresen, and Koller 2020). Here, the CoP emerged against the institution, as a group of practitioners became aware of the Army’s limitations in handling intercultural issues in military missions abroad. Practitioners with experience of this practice (and its failures) started to reach out to each other and connect across hierarchical boundaries, outside (and partially against) the formal institution. As reported by an interviewee, “[we] sat down together after official duty with a beer and a cigarette and discussed about how to better structure a network” with the aim to introduce intercultural training. The important words here are *after official duty with a beer and a cigarette*, which marks how the CoP emerged through storytelling *outside* the institutional context and, given the beer and cigarette, conceptually against it too. In the second stage, the CoP benefited from the support of the institution, as CoP members’ superiors bestowed legitimacy and material resources onto the CoP. This case thus shows that CoPs, by definition informal and horizontal, can emerge even in a most formal and hierarchical organization such as the German Army, as long as in the beginning practitioners enjoy (or appropriate) a degree of autonomy. On the other hand, subsequent help from the institutional hierarchy contributes to integrate the practice in the wider institutional setting.

Therefore, these works devoted to the EU and to the European environment more generally have privileged the autonomy and even independence of CoPs from the institutional setting they happen to occur in. This body of literature also shows that CoPs “can” emerge and act, but there is little way of knowing when and/or how they will do so. The EU environment, its social and political fabric, is thus conducive to social contacts, but this is neither sufficient nor necessary for the emergence of CoPs.

What kind of policy recommendations is possible on these premises? Have interpretative approaches anything to propose to institutional actors eager to see CoPs proliferate in their midst? The above suggests three points. First, as CoPs “emerge” from the practice, there is an inescapable element of indeterminacy—and one that interpretative approaches are keen to retain, against predictive (often quantitative)

approaches. When, where, based on what practice, and with what effect are questions that cannot be fully answered a priori. To put it differently, institutions cannot entirely control the process through which CoPs emerge and must accept and value a degree of creativity. Second, institutions do have the power however to foster the conditions under which CoPs can emerge, and to promote CoPs when they do. Conducive conditions include providing venues (both physical, such as cafeterias, and metaphorical, such as brainstorming opportunities among practitioners) and incentives for shared understandings to develop. Institutions thus can create “environments for participation in communities of practice” (Davenport and Prusak 2000, 190). Arguably, if public and private institutions want to see CoPs, they “must provide support” and “develop a less formal and more practice-based approach to communities and their work” (Brown and Duguid 1991, 45), as CoPs tend to be non-canonical and interstitial. The more structured help institutions can provide becomes important once the CoP emerges. Third, while the two former points suggest a narrow scope for institutional action, this correlates with higher chances of success in the mid to long term. A less structured and more flexible institutional approach to CoPs provides the leeway to achieve the alignment of practices, which is key to CoPs’ emergence. More importantly, a less formal and more practice-based approach in institutions, in general, is better able to accommodate the autonomy that CoPs embody, the need to find their way and to coalesce around a set of shared practices, as well as the breathing space for their actions. More flexible institutions might thus be in a better position mid to long term when it comes to sustain CoPs.

### The Performative Approach: Cultivated, Formal, and Top-Down CoPs

A performative approach to CoPs’ origins tackles the same issues and the same socio-material “mangle,” but with a different set of ontological and epistemological assumptions, largely based on rational choice and focusing on managerial techniques (Davenport and Prusak 2000; Cox 2005). The conceptualization of CoPs as a managerial tool radically departs from the framework analyzed so far. But while this approach includes “managerial technology” (Nicolini et al. 2022, 687) and ultimately a form of governmentality, the aspiration to understand institutions’ role in cultivating, prompting, or straightforwardly creating CoPs warrants close scrutiny in and of itself. The main challenge, as we are going to see, is maintaining practice alignment, with managerial and performative approaches privileging institutional interventions in support of the “mechanics” of CoPs over practical engagement or indirect support.

Early CoP thinkers themselves grappled with the issue of straightforward institutional interventions to create CoPs. Wenger led the shift from a more interpretative to a more performative approach. His book (1999) already included an epilogue entitled “Design for Learning,” which provided pointers about intentional creation of CoPs. While Wenger premised that “[l]earning cannot be designed” (229) because it can only “happen” (232), the urgent need to design social infrastructures that foster learning led him to be relatively specific about how to actually do it. In his view, the creation of learning communities depends on a dynamic combination of engagement, imagination, alignment, and—most importantly—explicit design, in order to provide a systematic, planned, and reflexive colonization of time and space (269). His publication with McDermott and Snyder (2002) further contributed to the impression that

CoPs can be created mainly through explicit design, if only specific steps were followed. Similarly, Brown and Duguid (2001) accepted the idea that CoPs can be established and leveraged for strategic advantage by following specific steps. These opened the way to analyses of CoPs as tools and to a large group of “how-to” publications, both academic and gray material.

Drawing also on the literature about knowledge creation (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), part of knowledge management highlighted that CoPs’ most valuable aspects are the tools (especially cognitive ones) that CoPs create and hone as they go about their business. CoPs are a powerful way to create, harvest, codify, and transmit best practices. CoPs are first and foremost considered as knowledge communities, in the sense that they exist because and for the sole purpose of perpetuating, sharing, and refining some form of expertise and mastery. Mutual bonds derive from practitioners’ passion about a topic (and this is shared with approaches mentioned in the previous sections), but the emphasis here is on the outcome of CoPs’ desire “to deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4). CoPs have been considered as particularly effective in transferring best practices through social relations (Nicolini, Scarbrough, and Gracheva 2016). To put it differently, they are a problem-solving tool, generating new solutions (e.g., members in a community know who and how to ask for help) as well as a mechanism to refine and update professional skills (Wenger and Snyder 2000).

Even though several scholars rejected the idea that there was a reified, clearly identifiable “thing” as a CoP, which scholars were out to “capture” (Gherardi 2009; Lave 2008, 290), this managerial understanding has been very successful. The concept’s early informal streak was overruled by the business management’s desire to harvest the innovative potential of CoPs for the benefit of the broader organization or institution. It became a matter not of defining or describing a CoP (even less so of contextualizing CoPs), but rather of identifying the best ways in which CoPs could be called into being and new knowledge produced, the concept of “practice” becoming synonymous with “best practices.” This inspired many managerial publications, all devoted to harnessing CoPs’ potential (e.g., Cordery et al. 2015). This drive to cultivate CoPs and (literally) employ the concept has also generated many attempts at “measuring” CoPs and their performance, unencumbered by ontological/epistemological discussions and inspired instead by rational choice literature on social networks and social capital.

“How to” manuals and websites proliferated, explaining (or rather, prescribing) what makes CoPs work, with very limited attention to the delicate relationship between a CoP and its founding practice. Probst and Borzillo (2008), for instance, identify “ten commandments” of do-s and don’t-s that are applicable also to the cases of the international organizations, such as the World Bank and the United Nations. These include the setting of clear and measurable objectives, a good working relationship between institutional “sponsor” and CoP “leader,” and a high level of one-to-one interactions. Narasimhan, Gardner, and Morris (2007) analyze CoPs and practices, and concluded that institutions are able to create both. They argued in favor of organizational support, individual drive to create a new practice (to make a career out of it), a differentiated knowledge, and a “defensible turf,” i.e., boundaries to access. Key individuals’ agency thus receives prominence, differently from interpretative approaches.

This performative approach has spurred private and public institutions’ efforts to create CoPs. “Cultivated” CoPs

have sprung up everywhere, becoming “a mainstay and perhaps even a classic approach.”<sup>2</sup> In the private sector, the creation and support of CoPs have reached considerable sophistication. In March 2022, for instance, AirBnB hired a Community Relationship Manager for Central and Latin America to handle relations with AirBnB CoPs leaders, i.e., leaders of local CoPs composed of AirBnB hosts, in a pyramid format. In March 2023, the same position was created for the German-speaking world, in charge of ~100 CoPs composed of AirBnB local hosts gathered around Facebook groups. Interestingly, in this more recent call, CoPs were re-branded as “clubs” and the community feeling toned down. In both cases, the job selection was handled by a large agency specialized in building online communities.<sup>3</sup> There is even a Community Industry Award to celebrate the best in the “community industry” every year.<sup>4</sup> In 2023, the first prize went to Spotify, the giant music streaming platform. Along the same lines, CoPs have been fostered also via digital platforms. Here, CoP members are expected to interact and post messages, thus populating the IT repository of data and information.

International (public) institutions have taken to CoPs too. Most notably, the World Bank has become a big international sponsor of CoPs as a way to promote best practices. The concept of a “knowledge bank” articulated by James Wolfensohn led to 120+ CoPs being created by the 1990s. The general objective has been to improve sharing of ideas and practices across functionaries and national representatives, as connecting people is now seen as more important than exchanging documents.<sup>5</sup> CoP numbers kept growing, and the World Bank has hosted or co-hosted 350 CoPs, publishing its first “Gardener’s Guide to Communities of Practice” already in 2012.<sup>6</sup> It has also promoted dubious CoPs and practices, as is the case of the World Bank programs sponsored by the South Korean government, via a trust fund, with the aim to share South Korean development best practices with developing countries and thus create business opportunities for South Korean firms.

How do these institutional efforts fare in terms of actually creating CoPs? What are the challenges, pitfalls, and ultimate results of a top-down approach? It is instructive to analyze a paradigmatic case study of cultivated, top-down CoPs, which deepens the theoretical grasp on the relationship between institutions and CoPs. The evidence is provided by the EU’s effort at promoting CoPs via the European Commission’s Joint Research Council (JRC) from 2016 onwards. While a substantial effort was made at first, the mid- to long-term effects have not stood the test of time. Part of the reason is certainly to be found in the unfortunate timing, as COVID-19 came to impact the still young CoPs. In the light of considerations presented above, however, practice misalignment stands out as another, very plausible and very substantial obstacle, leading to the de facto abandonment of

the initiative and opening the door to potential accusations of “managerial technology” (Nicolini et al. 2022, 687).

The EU engaged in cultivating CoPs from 2016 onwards, as part of an effort to re-organize and re-invigorate the JRC. Employing more than 2,000 researchers in a wide variety of sectors and spread across six member states, for long the JRC was the main research-producing organization for the European Commission.<sup>7</sup> In 2016, the “JRC Strategy 2030” slightly shifted its focus to become a knowledge *management* organization,<sup>8</sup> thus engaging in the circulation and use of knowledge for policy-making alongside knowledge production (Joint Research Centre 2016). A key step in this re-positioning was the creation of knowledge centers and competence centers, i.e., virtual centers involving not only staff from the JRC and the European Commission’s Directorates General (DGs), but also scholars/researchers external to the EU and working on topics of interest to the EU. These centers were expected to turn into CoPs whenever possible, thanks to CoPs management skills acquired and provided by JRC staff involved in them (Joint Research Centre 2016, 19). No less than two directorates (H and I) within the JRC were to oversee the new management structure and philosophy.

The 2016 shift in organizational thinking was thus clear: The JRC was expected to promote CoPs in order to become a hot-house for the circulation of ideas benefitting EU policy-making. CoPs were central to this endeavor, involving JRC researchers, EU officials, experts, and the general public. CoPs would reconcile the “two communities” of researchers and policymakers,<sup>9</sup> they would break down organizational and disciplinary “silos,” and they would engage citizens and the public at large (Topp et al. 2018).<sup>10</sup> This shift fitted the EU aspiration to support better work practices and “better regulation,”<sup>11</sup> which had led the European Commission under Juncker’s leadership to reassess its role in knowledge management. A 2016 Commission Strategy<sup>12</sup> also stressed the role of “collaborative working” and identified as an action point the support of “thematic communities of practice, professional networks, and exchange of best practice.”<sup>13</sup> The EU “democratic deficit” would also decrease as a consequence.

However, little to no substantial attention was paid to practice alignment and to the relationship between founding practice and CoP, as shown in the official documentation. In line with other managerial efforts at CoPs creation elsewhere, the JRC issued in 2021 its own “how to” guide to CoPs’ creation: “The Communities of Practice Playbook.”<sup>14</sup> It summarized the key steps to be undertaken. While its definition of a CoP de facto overlapped with the original definition of Wenger, a CoP’s “levers” and “roles” pointed in three further directions: (1) CoPs as an instrument for *managing data*, information, and knowledge, consistently with the 2016 Commission Strategy on the topic; (2) CoPs as instruments for *managing work* more generally, e.g., investing and providing resources, facilitation, and learning, etc.;

<sup>2</sup>Mercy Harper interviewing Rachel Happe, The future of communities and knowledge management, APQC, October 14, 2021, [The Future of Communities and Knowledge Management with Rachel Happe](https://www.futureofcommunities.com/knowledge-management-with-rachel-happe/) (podbean.com).

<sup>3</sup>Standing on Giants, forty-three staff members as of December 2022 and forty-eight staff members as of September 2023, spread over fourteen countries. See also Vacancy: Community Relationship Manager - South America, Caribbean, and Central America - Standing on Giants; <https://www.standingongiants.com/community-relationship-manager-for-airbnb-german-speaking/>. Last accessed January 22, 2024.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.cmxhub.com/cmx-awards>, last accessed January 22, 2024.

<sup>5</sup>The rationale behind this was explained here: <https://www.jivesoftware.com/resource-library/videos/world-bank-andrei-tolstopiatenko/>, accessed November 27, 2015, no longer available.

<sup>6</sup>The second edition, issued in 2013, can be found [here](https://www.knowledgebank.org/).

<sup>7</sup>See [here](https://www.jrc.ec.europa.eu/) for more information. Last accessed January 22, 2024.

<sup>8</sup>Castello P. Ed., Knowledge Management for Policy – Stocktaking of one year of JRC activities, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2017, doi:10.2760/245375.

<sup>9</sup>For a very pertinent analysis of how two CoPs within an institution can *not* get in contact/interact, see Pring (2023).

<sup>10</sup>It is worth noting that four out of five authors of Topp et al. (2018) were employed by the JRC at the time of writing.

<sup>11</sup>For this, see Radaelli (2007).

<sup>12</sup>European Commission Strategy, “Data, Information, Knowledge at the European Commission,” C(2016)6626.

<sup>13</sup>Bold in the original.

<sup>14</sup>Authored by JRC officials C. Catana, I. Debremaeker, S. Szkola, and D. Williquet (2021). Available [here](https://www.jrc.ec.europa.eu/). Last accessed January 22, 2024.

and (3) CoPs as communities, bringing together different individuals and/or groups, and breaking silos—thus an instrument for *managing people*. Further details were included in a Staff Working Document, which listed important features to “[s]upport thematic communities of practice,”<sup>15</sup> including a community sponsor (such as a high-level personality within the European Commission or even a Vice President), a lead DG, a community management team, a dedicated budget, etc. A further publication stressed that CoPs creation started with “planting the seeds,” continued with “growing the community,” and finally led to “harvesting the results.”<sup>16</sup> Community champions would play a key role, and so would “platforms,” digital spaces for knowledge-sharing and community-building, such as Connected@.<sup>17</sup>

Despite lack of attention to practice alignment, by 2017, there were reportedly twenty-seven CoPs at the JRC,<sup>18</sup> and by 2022, the JRC webpage listed several “communities” on a wide range of topics (Figure 1). A typical example would be the CoP on modeling, launched in 2017 with the task of overseeing and expanding the range of models employed by the European Commission in its forecasting activities. The center established a Commission-wide modeling inventory in relation to the project “Modelling Inventory and Knowledge Management System of the European Commission”, together with a CoP on modeling, contributing to best practice in the EU policy cycle. The CoP, composed of modelers and policymakers, was expected to promote a responsible and coherent use of models, as well as to act as a think tank for modeling-related issues. It first met in December 2018, with a public conference in 2019 and a virtual one in 2021.<sup>19</sup>

However, JRC-sponsored CoPs do not seem to have passed the test of time. The JRC Strategic Plan 2020–2024 refers to CoPs only in passim, mentioning that they are expanding, including on cutting-edge topics such as artificial intelligence. The 2020 JRC Annual Report mentions CoPs only in the Annex, reporting that CoPs were created for three DGs. Interestingly, it also adds that “progress towards Commission-wide communities [was] delayed and blocked” (99). The JRC Annual Report for 2021 includes no mention at all of CoPs. In the case of the CoP on modeling, the report overviewing the center’s activities in 2018–2020 refers to the CoP just once in passim,<sup>21</sup> and no further report on the center has been issued since. In the revamping of the JRC webpage at the start of February 2023, the list of communities was deleted and replaced by a generic webpage.

Arguably, the JRC approach to cultivating CoPs illustrates the perils of practice misalignment in a top-down approach to CoPs creation. In line with knowledge management and international institutions’ take on the subject, cultivating CoPs stems from the managerial desire to call CoPs into existence rather than the attempt to cultivate new practices

from which CoPs might emerge—a much longer and more resource-intensive path to CoPs’ creation.

Therefore, a top-down performative approach, in which institutions instigate CoPs’ creation, ultimately struggles to come to terms with the relationship between a CoP and its founding practice. The aspiration to ripen benefits from further derivative practices (like more participatory governance), while perfectly legitimate, are difficult to reconcile and align with the need to stress foundational practices, e.g. modeling for forecasting, which come with their own situated understandings. Institutions are not by definition unable to create CoPs, but their emphasis on CoPs’ subsequent benefits (in terms of knowledge or e.g. participatory governance) is at odds with the highly situated and informal practical knowledge of CoPs. In other words, institutions tend to “effectively sweep away the clutter of practice” (Brown and Duguid 1991, 45), and this oversimplification has significant mid- to long-term consequences.

## Conclusions

This article has analyzed three arguments about CoPs’ origins, supported by different parts of the literature and by a variety of empirical evidence drawn especially from the EU and the European experience. It testifies to the multiple possibilities that analyses based on CoPs can deliver in international affairs, alongside other, more established instruments (see the “Introduction” section to this special forum). A theoretical perspective centered on CoPs “offers a parsimonious social [and political!] account of the connections between expert knowledge, social organization, their perpetuation in time, and the emergence of novelty” (Nicolini et al. 2022, 681). A CoPs perspective is particularly suited to capture the balance between change and continuity that practice approaches have strived to put at the core of IR theory (Sondarjee 2021). The article has aimed to recenter the controversy between interpretative and performative approaches to CoPs’ creation to focus on the key relevance of founding practices and practical alignments. In this vein, institutions can influence CoPs’ emergence and sustainance only as long as they take into account the delicate relationship between CoPs and their founding practices. The article also raises the broader issue of how to design research agendas that include sociality’s role in international politics.

The article has argued that CoPs’ origins reside in their founding practices, which are ontologically prior to CoPs. CoPs emerge from practices, as non-verbal and then verbal dimensions weave the practical engagement into a common identity and a shared understanding. Once CoPs emerge, they in turn have a co-constitutive effect on practices. Not only practitioners refine and transform them as they reproduce them, but CoPs capture the cutting edge of innovation in the face of uncertainty and/or adversity (Bicchi 2022). In this vein, it is only by cultivating practices that it is possible to bring about CoPs, but there is no guarantee of this happening, as practices and CoPs emerge in a creative and indeterminate manner. Practices alignment does occupy a central role, though, despite a degree of freedom and indeterminacy here too.

Much of the debate in the literature has however looked at the relationship between institutions and CoPs, rather than practices and CoPs. On the one hand, more interpretative approaches have been skeptical of institutions’ capacity to influence CoPs’ emergence and have instead focused on CoPs’ capacity to influence the very existence and daily working of institutions. In their contextualized engagement, CoPs “do” institutions, bringing them to life and providing

<sup>15</sup>SWD(2016)333 final, Action 4.3.

<sup>16</sup>Science for Policy Report “Enabling CoPs. Knowledge-sharing for Better Implementation of EU Regional Policy” (2016), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup>One sector has been data visualization and data processing, including EMM Open Source Intelligence Suite, which is a desktop software application to gather intelligence from open sources, including checks on personal backgrounds, categorization of word patterns, with an eye to contribute to the work of DG Home, the main partner in this endeavor.

<sup>18</sup>See flyer, European Commission (2017) “Knowledge management for policy” available here. Last accessed February 15, 2023.

<sup>19</sup>European Commission (2019) “The European Commission’s Centre on Modelling,” document no longer available. Record available here. Last accessed December 20, 2022.

<sup>20</sup>See the link on Web Archive here, visited on January 22, 2024.

<sup>21</sup>European Commission (2021) “The Competence Centre on Modelling (CC-MOD). Overview of activities 2018-2020” available here. Last accessed January 22, 2024.

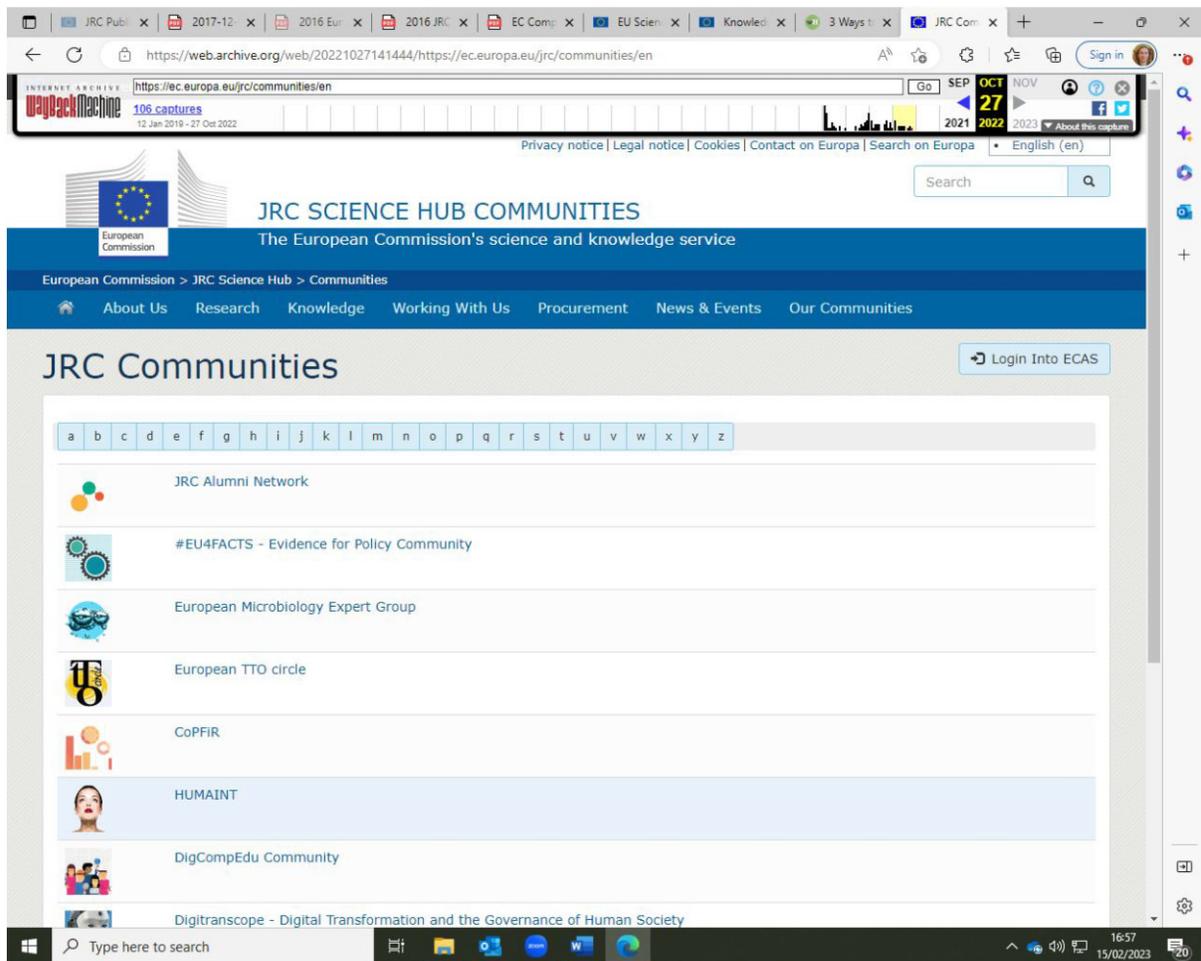


Figure 1. List of “JRC communities,” last captured by the Wayback Machine on October 27, 2022.<sup>20</sup>

much needed practical understanding, as was the case of NATO’s enlargement after the end of the Cold War (Adler 2008) or of the World Bank’s reform (Sondarjee 2021). On the other hand, performative approaches have addressed institutions’ capacity to directly cultivate CoPs. This perspective, which draws largely from the literature on knowledge management and from institutions themselves, has argued that, if certain steps are put in place, it is possible to insulate life into CoPs. It is undeniable that institutions do have an influence on CoP, and this is an important consideration. There are doubts however about the extent to which cultivated CoPs are able to thrive in the mid to long term. The example of CoPs cultivated by the EU via the JRC illustrates the challenges, due to practices misalignment: while attention goes to the “technology” of CoPs creation, founding practices tend to fade in the background.

Are these three approaches compatible, at least to an extent? It is tempting to suggest that they are, given their emphasis on different parts of CoPs’ “anatomy.” The first argument highlights the relevance of practices, which is not denied by the other two. The second argument stresses the role of CoPs in institutions, which again is accepted from the other two approaches. Finally, the potential for institutions to have an effect on CoPs is yet again not contradicting the other positions. However, the analytical choice to emphasize one aspect rather than the other stems from deep-seated ontological and epistemological differences, especially in relation to the third perspective, which cannot be brushed over.

The choice to prioritize a specific aspect emerges from assumptions about what matters most in politics. Rather than reconciling diverging views, the hope is that there is sufficient passion about research on CoPs to enable a “generative dance” (Cook and Brown 1999) between the three poles of this conversation to further our understanding of social learning, groups, and organizations in international politics.

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