

Editorial Quality, Standards and Governance

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- Markdown version: <https://github.com/heinzwittenbrink/slides-editorial-processes/blob/main/lecture-3.md>
- Pdf (with annotations): <https://heinzwittenbrink.github.io/slides-editorial-processes/lecture-3.pdf>

Goals

1. Understand the differences between effectiveness and quality
2. Reflect about the function of standards for the evaluation of quality
3. Know examples of standards which are important for editorial quality
4. Know important content strategy texts about standards and quality
5. Reflect about the relevance of standards in our professional practice

Exercise

- Please watch the presentation and/or the recording.
- Form groups of approximately 5 people.
- In each group, formulate questions and statements on the topic of standards.

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- Define which standards may be relevant for contentstrategy.at. (Think about the purpose of the channel from your perspective as content strategy students. How can it support your reputation as academically trained content strategists?)
 - Develop ideas on how compliance with these standards can be ensured at contentstrategy.at.
 - Post the results in the course's Slack Channel.

Time: By the end of the month. Use the next session (25 November) for the meeting, as I will probably not be able to attend. I am looking forward to your ideas!

Theses

- The effectiveness and quality of content are two frames of reference that can be used to direct and evaluate the results of content strategists' work.
 - Effectiveness and quality of content cannot be reduced to one another and cannot be separated from one another.
 - Effectiveness can be measured quantitatively. Content quality can be evaluated with respect to standards.
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- Content strategies are needed because the impact of content should be targeted and is made possible by the quality of the content.
 - Determining the goals to be achieved through content and setting standards require digital governance.

Thesis 1: Effectiveness vs. quality

The effectiveness and quality of content are two frames of reference that can be used to direct and evaluate the results of content strategists' work.

This first thesis relates to two different aspects of content that we come across time and again in our work. Both also have something to do with the definition of the term content strategy.¹

The first aspect is easier to grasp. It is the aspect of content effectiveness. This is simply about wanting to achieve a goal with a piece of content. In many cases, this goal is a monetary goal. Either I want to sell the content itself or I want to sell something with the content. I can then easily recognize the effectiveness and also measure whether I actually sell something with the content. Of course, it's only that simple in theory. In practice, it is often not so easy to decide whether and which content contributed to the sale of something.

A distinction must be made between the effectiveness of the content and whether this content is good in the broadest sense. This word *good* is difficult to define, but whoever deals with content uses the idea that content is more or less good or that publications are more or less good. This *goodness* or quality of content is a prerequisite for achieving something with the content, but there is no direct one-to-one relationship between the two. Of course, poor content can also achieve goals under certain conditions. And whether a piece of content is good or not and whether I want to publish good content or not can also be independent of achieving a goal.

The contrast can be clearly illustrated using the example of traditional journalism—as well as many of the issues relating to the quality of content and editing. In traditional journalism, there is a strict separation between editorial and marketing. Marketing must not influence the editorial team. For example, it is not allowed to say: You have to write an article that supports the sale of this or that product for which we were able to place advertisements. What journalists do must not depend on whether the newspaper or magazine or whatever publication sells better or worse afterwards. They have to work according to other criteria, namely so-called journalistic criteria. In the long run, as is often assumed, good quality will also promote sales. But this does not necessarily have to be the case. There may be completely different motives for good quality, e.g. the ethics of the people who make a newspaper.

In this lecture, I don't just want to deal with why we need good content, but above all with how we can recognize it and whether quality can also be measured.

The contrast between quality and effectiveness is very woodcut-like. In reality, the two often go hand in hand. Effectiveness is not simply something that I measure against a specific goal. If content is really only there to achieve a certain goal, then quality doesn't really play a special role. But the moment I want to achieve something else with the content, e.g. convey certain core messages or create or secure a certain reputation, short-term benefits that I achieve efficiently, so to speak, can interfere with longer-term goals. For example, I can damage my brand by selling something that doesn't fit with how I want to appear to the public in the long term.

Content strategy, especially in content marketing, is often defined as an activity in which content is used to achieve certain goals that, as such, do not necessarily have anything to do with the content. I need content to support a specific campaign. The strategy then consists of developing the content to fit this objective, so to speak. The original definitions of content strategy are different. They do not refer to what goals I achieve with the content, but rather what strategy there is for the content itself, i.e. what communication goals I pursue with the content. Content strategy in this sense assumes that an organization, including a company, is a publisher and that this publishing itself is important for the company. In many cases, this may be ideological, and the goals are only predetermined—but many companies define themselves by a mission, in the sense of which publications are also important. Content strategy here is about defining the content that fits this mission and then defining and developing the individual pieces of content and their lifecycle to fit this overall goal. If content strategy is understood in this way, then it is clear that individual pieces of content must be measured by whether they correspond to this strategy in terms of quality. If it does not, then the organization is not achieving its goals.

If we look at the beginnings of content strategy on the web, it is precisely this importance of quality that motivates content strategy and which they use to argue in favour of their discipline. Kristina Halvorson, in particular, has always insisted that companies become publishers on the web and therefore must abide by the rules of publishing. It is clear that content has an economic impact, but it has it as content.

Material: Lucie Hyde on KPIs and Goals

<https://de.slideshare.net/luciehyde/lucie-hyde-csa2013keynote10thingsivelearned> (Hyde, 2013)

MEASUREMENT IS ESSENTIAL BUT KPIs ARE NOT GOALS

Measuring effectiveness is essential if we are to succeed

Quality is NOT the same as effectiveness. Effectiveness is more important. A robust measurement framework should include IMPACT and HEALTH measurements. Outcome-based goals are also important – but they often (usually) include more than content.

Thesis 2: Interdependence of effectiveness and quality

Effectiveness and quality of content cannot be reduced to one another and cannot be separated from one another.²

The fact that effectiveness and quality cannot be separated from each other is due at least in part to the fact that content requires trust in order to be effective. Content is only taken seriously if it is trusted, and trust in turn depends very much on whether the author of the content is trusted. As a rule, you are not in a position to check whether content is correct yourself. If you were, you would probably not need the content. You have to believe that the content is *correct* or *true*, and this belief depends on whether you believe the people or authorities who publish a particular piece of content.

But you can also start from the quality of a piece of content and ask what its effectiveness looks like. Here we can say that for at least almost all content that is created and produced, there is also a purpose that goes beyond the mere content. Dissertations, for example, are not written to be read by many readers, but to achieve a certain academic degree. Even if someone writes for themselves alone, they may expect the content to have an effect on the author themselves, e.g. to help clarify certain thoughts or remind them of certain things. The content always has a purpose, which is not just the purpose of the content.

Standards are a crucial means of establishing this trust.

Standards ensure that certain expectations of readers or users are met. They do this when they are explicit, but also when they guide the editorial work in an organization so that readers know what to expect. That's why you trust a news program like Zib2 in Austria, for example. People know that research is done in this case, that the editorial team strives to be impartial and so on. Trust in the program depends on certain journalistic standards being met. Conversely, it can also be said that those who do not trust this program, for example, do so because they assume that these standards are not adhered to, or because they have not understood the standards and the connection between journalistic work and such standards.

Perhaps to put it another way and to anticipate a little: in order to achieve a goal with content, my addressees have to trust me, and I gain this trust by adhering to certain quality standards. I do a lot for this trust when I publish these standards, so that it is also easy for my addressees to check whether I am adhering to these standards. At the same time, these standards ensure that I can check my own work against quality criteria.

Thesis 3: Standards vs. measurement

Effectiveness can be measured quantitatively. Content quality can be evaluated with respect to standards.

It is often easy to measure, i.e. quantify, whether a certain content is efficient. Since efficiency means that you achieve something through the content, it is usually relatively easy to determine whether what you wanted to achieve has actually happened. It is perhaps easiest with financial goals, but it is also possible to determine what has happened with other goals, such as influencing opinions. Even with the aforementioned dissertation, the aim of which is to obtain an academic degree, it is possible to determine whether or not this aim has been achieved through the content.

The fact that people often focus primarily on the efficiency of content when dealing with content strategy is perhaps not only due to the interests of clients or employers, but also because measurability is so easy here. This also creates the risk of confusing efficiency with measurable efficiency and the latter with the quality of content. In many cases, it is possible to measure what has been achieved with content, but this does not necessarily mean that the objectives were meaningful for the organization or the company. For example, measuring the success of content by how often it is viewed, shared or recommended is no proof of its actual effectiveness. Unfortunately, the saying still applies here: "If you measure a lot, you measure a lot of crap."

Content quality is much more difficult to measure, as we have already seen in this course. At the beginning, we looked in detail at how traditional editors on the one hand and Google on the other assess quality, and we identified a variety of criteria. Obviously, these criteria vary depending on the content in question. However, as everyone would probably agree, it is quite difficult to simply summarize these criteria. What they probably have in common is that they are based on common evaluations by the senders and receivers of content. For example, if I consider scientific accuracy as a quality criterion, then a scientifically important text addresses users for whom it is relevant, and it shows these users that the institution or the people from whom this text comes attach importance to scientific accuracy. Obviously, quality cannot be separated from social evaluations.

But regardless of the question of what quality actually is and constitutes, it is difficult to determine whether this quality can or cannot be attributed to a text. That is the main issue here. When I attribute quality to a text, I am using a yardstick, even if it is not usually a yardstick that can be easily quantified. If I say that scientific quality is my yardstick, then I can use a kind of school grading system to judge whether the text has this quality or not, but I cannot simply measure it, or at least measuring it is quite difficult. If I measure it, then I have to go back to efficiency criteria, as is the case with scientific texts in so-called scientometrics, for example, where citations are measured and made a criterion of quality. However, this example in particular makes it clear that the real quality is not necessarily measured. Texts can be cited very often but still have extremely mediocre content quality, while extremely high-quality scientific texts may only reach a small audience.

Quality is something immanent to the text, which is precisely why it cannot simply be measured.

This dilemma, that quality is central to the impact and evaluation of texts but is difficult to measure, is probably impossible to escape in principle. However, it is at least possible to find a kind of workaround, which consists of orienting oneself towards certain standards.

In order to answer the question of why it is not possible to measure quality here, I would like to add a brief consideration: When evaluating the quality of texts, one always also evaluates whether these texts follow certain rules. A scientific text, for example, is a text that follows certain scientific citation rules and in which the data must have a certain quality and perhaps also be accessible in a certain way so that it can be checked whether the text follows these rules. Following a rule is not simply something that can be measured quantitatively, and to determine whether one is following a rule, normal criteria can only be specified to a limited extent, because otherwise one would again need rules to determine that one is following a rule. This is a philosophical problem that Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, dealt with intensively. However, the quality of texts and content depends on whether they follow rules—which does not mean that the quality of the text is exhausted by this.

Standards are something like explicit rules. This is relatively clear in the case of scientific standards. It is similar with journalistic standards, which are often formulated in well-known journalistic style guides, e.g. the Yahoo style guide. These are also rules that are not only implicitly adhered to, but that are explicitly specified to the employees of a journalistic editorial team, for example.

I have already said that the quality of texts, of content, is generally a matter of joint assessment by senders and recipients, and it is fitting that such standards are generally also publicly accessible to users or readers. Quality newspapers, for example, publish their standards and thus allow readers to determine whether texts meet these standards. If you want to ensure that your own texts adhere to certain standards, and if you also want to let readers know what quality you are delivering to them, then communicating standards is a good way of doing this.

A few years ago, for example, Joe Pulizzi, one of the most important theorists of content marketing, called for content marketers to adhere to journalistic standards, and to do so more strictly than traditional journalistic media ([Pulizzi, 2013](#), chapter “Content Marketing Code of Ethics”). The reason for this is that there is often a risk of manipulation in content marketing in particular, so adhering to journalistic standards ensures that the accusation of manipulation is not justified - of course only if these standards are actually applied.

With this in mind, I would now like to argue in favor of giving standards a central role in editorial work. As soon as standards are set, it is relatively easy to say what quality you want to achieve and whether you are achieving quality, even if in individual cases it can always be debated whether a particular piece of content actually meets a standard or not. However, this debatability is fundamentally linked to rules, and it does not mean that the standards are meaningless.

Since standards are about facilitating or enforcing evaluations – namely in one’s own publication –it generally makes little sense to invent standards oneself. After all, you want to refer to values that already exist. That is why it is best to use existing standards or adapt these standards.

The best-known standards for content and publications are journalistic standards. A lot of content from companies and organizations is similar to journalistic products, so it makes sense to always consider where to follow journalistic standards. One important standard is the famous “cross-check – double check!”, which means that you have to check every statement, that you then check the statement again with other sources or another procedure if possible, and that you then question the statement again and consider whether there might be something wrong with it. As we all know, this standard is rarely adhered to in content marketing, for example, and content marketing often loses credibility as a result.

I have already mentioned scientific standards, and you should all be familiar with them, as you are doing a scientific Master’s degree at this university. Transparency is central to scientific standards. Scientific statements must be based on facts or data, and it must be possible for readers to understand how they are based on these facts. To this end, it must be possible, at least in principle, but preferably in reality, to check these data and facts for oneself and possibly come to different conclusions on their basis. In editorial practice, of course, this often plays only a minor role outside of science. But to a certain extent, you can follow these standards, especially online, by at least linking all sources well. Other standards relate to the accessibility of texts, adherence to certain ethical or taste rules and so on. Here too, it usually makes sense to specify an explicit standard, e.g. a certain code of conduct.

**** Impact counts—content strategy from the client’s perspective ****

From the client’s perspective, the impact of content is the priority. Content strategists are supposed to increase the effectiveness of content. The effect of the content strategy itself is reflected, on the one hand, in the effect it has on the users of the content, for example in content marketing. On the other hand, this effect also lies in the better usability of content and more effective production (health).

The impact of the work of content strategists can be measured using metrics. On the front end, these metrics refer to measurable user reactions. The best way to capture effects in the backend is through costs.

We have heard several times - I also know this motto from [Sascha Stoltenow](#) - that it is best to avoid the expression content strategy when speaking to clients. This has to do with the impact orientation of clients. Content strategists are commissioned or hired because

customers or employers hope to have an impact. Conversely, you can only sell content strategy if you justify that it has an impact. It's much easier to describe the impact of a content strategy than what you do with it.

However, content only has an impact on the user if its quality is right. The users are - this is a triviality, but it is often forgotten by the clients - not at all interested in the objectives of the clients. What is important to them is whether they can use the content and whether the content meets their needs and requirements. It is impossible to discuss whether content meets the needs of users without also talking about the quality of content. Users want content to be *good*, whatever that means. Content strategists would have to focus on this quality from the user's perspective and, if necessary, even enforce it against the clients if the effect intended by the client is actually to be achieved.

Content Marketing's Code of Ethics

Content marketing should seek to adhere to stricter standards of reporting than traditional journalism, due to its different legal position and increased commercial motivations. ([Pulizzi, 2013](#), chapter "Content Marketing Code of Ethics")

Content marketers should take care to disclose the sponsorship and intent of their work while abiding by the following practices:

Adhere to journalism's core values of honesty, integrity, accountability, and responsibility.

Acknowledge facts that may compromise the integrity of a story or opinion.

Minimize potential harm to sources or subjects of stories.

Expose truth as fully as possible.

Always credit sources of content or ideas, never plagiarizing or repurposing stories or prose, whether one's own or another's, whether written content, photography, or other media, whether the original source is known or not.

Fulfill promises made to contributors and sources in the course of reporting.

Ensure that the reader understands the source, sponsor, and intent of the content

Disclose all potential conflicts of interest or appearance of conflict."

Examples for standards

- [BBC Editorial Guidelines](#) ([BBC, 2024](#))
- CEN Workshop Agreement 17493: Journalism Trust Initiative ([European Committee for Standardization, 2019](#))

Example of a standard for government content

[Content design: planning, writing and managing content - Guidance - GOV.UK](#) (*Content Design, n.d.*)

Thesis 4: Standards and content strategy

Content strategies are needed because the impact of content should be targeted and is made possible by the quality of the content.

As already mentioned, content strategists are at least partly responsible for the quality of the content of organizations and this means that their work has a special relationship with standards. They are always responsible for reminding the organization how important quality content is to achieving its goals.

On the one hand, standards can be used to measure whether the content being produced now is actually of the quality it should be. Above all, however, content strategists can ensure that an organization's content is of a certain quality by working on the joint definition of standards. Of course, simply selecting standards is not enough; it's also about who is responsible for meeting those standards and how to get an organization to actually implement them.

In her book *Managing Chaos* (Welchman, 2015), Sarah Welchman writes extensively about standards, which she sees as one of the pillars of digital governance. She is not only concerned with content but with every form of action in digital markets, but the relationship to content is relatively clear. Welchman is primarily concerned with the question of who is responsible for compliance with standards. Content strategists are needed to become aware of the relevance of standards for content in the first place, but they are not usually in a position of power to actually set these standards. As a rule, this actually requires the leadership of an organization that must specify which standards must or must not be adhered to for publications. The task of content strategists is then to make it clear that these decisions must be made and to ensure that they are taken into account in the production of content. For example, they have to argue how much manpower is required to follow a certain standard, and they have to advocate, for example, that appropriate training takes place in the company. Content strategists are then something like the guardians of standards in the company. Even if they are not solely responsible for setting standards, creating the conditions for their compliance and ensuring that they are adhered to on an ongoing basis, they must ensure that these standards are implemented in practice. Operationally, compliance with the standards is the task of editorial teams. Here we can see how closely content strategy and editorial work are linked.

Standards should not be confused with guidelines or style guides, which refer to formal details or to the fact that it is easy to determine whether certain criteria are met. The style guides define how certain standards are achieved—they are rooted in the standards, so to speak—but as such they only define whether these standards are implemented. This is easy to distinguish in the case of scientific standards, for example. The scientific standard includes correct citation, i.e. citing the source for all statements and showing where it can be found. However, whether this requirement is implemented by adhering to the APA citation guidelines, as we do here in the degree program, or by using others, e.g. the Chicago Manual of Style, is a matter for a style guide. In the same way, it is a standard to reach users in a certain situation in the appropriate way and not to discriminate against them. This can then result in statements in the style guide, e.g. for addressing users, as we know from the media and other companies. However, these style guide rules alone do not form the standard. The standard should also be formulated as such. The transitions here are of course fluid.

Material: Content Strategists as advocates of standards

https://wittenbrink-net.translate.google.de/zielsetzung-und-messung-der-arbeit-von-contentstrategen-wirksamkeit-und-qualitat/?_x_tr_sl=de&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=de&_x_tr_pto=wapp (Wittenbrink, 2016)

Thesis 5: Standards and governance

Determining the goals to be achieved through content and setting standards require digital governance.

I would now like to go into this topic of governance in more detail, although it needs to be dealt with in its own right and is also covered here in the program. *Governance* is the term used to describe the way in which an organization is controlled, i.e. what the *government* does. The term comes from the Latin word for the helmsman, *gubernator*. Good governance in a country ensures that it is governed properly, and likewise, good governance in an organization ensures that goals are achieved while all parts of the organization work to support those goals and the achievement of those goals.

In her book *Managing Chaos*, Sarah Welchman divides governance into three major areas: strategy, standards and policies. We deal with the topic of strategy again and again here at university, and it actually makes up our core content. By policies, Welchman means everything that serves to prevent risks. In the area of content, for example, a policy is not to use copyrighted material. If this policy is not adhered to, this can lead to lawsuits that cost a lot of money. Another policy is to avoid discrimination. Here, too, negative consequences are to be feared. However, the policy does not positively define how the organization achieves its goals. This positive definition is the task of the standards. The standards determine what the ambition of the organization is. Quality journalism, to come back to this example, strives to meet high standards of impartiality and transparency in its research. Tabloid journalism is much more lax in these standards, so that it is often not even measured against these quality criteria.

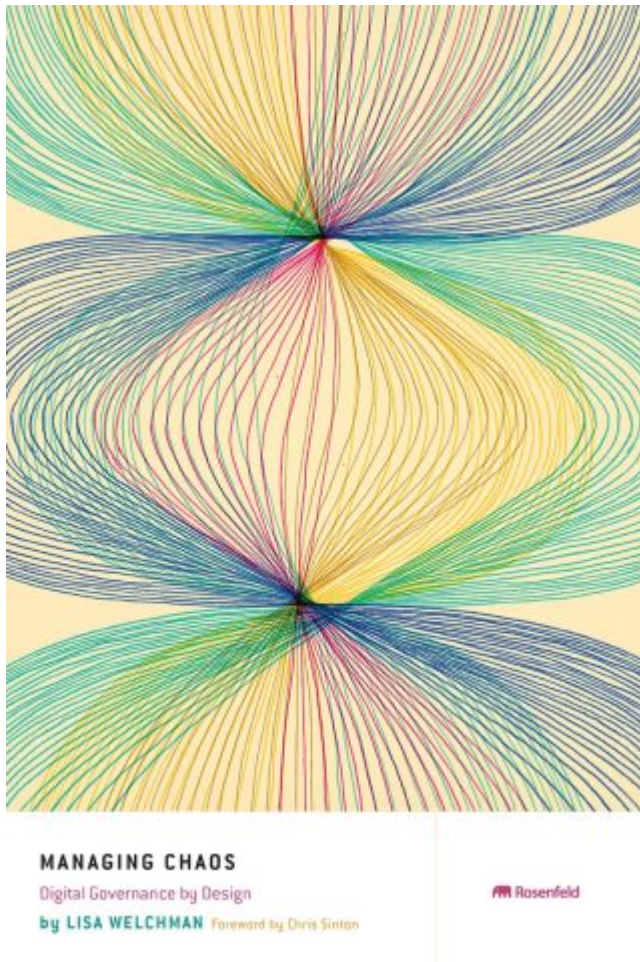
In her book, Sarah Welchman always starts from the tasks and team structure of an organization. She first defines who belongs to the team and how, and also includes all external parties with whom the organization works. Then she tries to find out how the responsibilities for strategy, policies and standards are currently distributed, so she does something like an audit, and then she develops a suitable distribution of the various roles for the organization. Her book contains various examples of how the governance of organizations is regulated, and it is mainly because of these practical examples that it is so important.

The issue of standards touches directly on the issue of governance, not only because standards must be set by the leadership of an organization, but also because the leadership of the organization must provide the necessary resources and ensure that compliance with the standards is monitored. If certain standards are not met, this is a direct reflection of the quality in the organization.

To summarize once again: we have looked at the role of standards in ensuring quality from various perspectives. On the one hand, we have differentiated between quality and efficiency. In doing so, I referred to Lucy Hyde, through whom I actually came up with this explicit distinction between the two topics. We then looked at standards as a means of ensuring and measuring quality. At least indirectly, I assumed that this is about setting and adhering to rules, and that adherence to rules cannot be measured quantitatively. This problem could be further explored philosophically, but that would go beyond the scope of such a lecture—although it is an extremely interesting topic. I then went into the topic of the connection between standards and governance, which I consider to be crucial. Here I referred to Sarah Welschman

Managing the impact of an organization's content, such as determining and enforcing the standards to which that content meets, are key components of digital governance. Governance must ensure that the impact of the content is targeted and that the standards required to achieve this impact are met. Lisa Welchman, who worked for ActiveStandards for a long time, has worked intensively on digital governance in the

content strategy community . She has identified digital strategy, standards and policies as the main areas of responsibility for digital governance . I increasingly believe that her work has a key role in describing the tasks of content strategists and their place in organizations.



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/rosenfeldmedia/15911189043/in/album-72157650408729568/>

Lisa Welchman on Standards

Managing Chaos - Lisa Welchman.epub (Link to local version (Welchman, 2015, Chapter Digital Standards))

Preview: AI Support for the evaluation of content

Home - Acrolinx

Use of ChatGBT to support editorial standards?

Sources

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1. The starting point for these considerations were the key terms that Lucie Hyde spoke about at the Meetup *Making the Call on Content Quality: Effectiveness and Quality* during a presence week of our program 2016 in London. Hyde explained that content strategy is always focussed on both, but that effectiveness takes precedence. She also used the example of the companies she has worked for to show that effectiveness and quality are understood very differently depending on the client.

In this and other presentations, Hyde has focussed on how to measure effectiveness. She talks about the need to distinguish between impact and *health*, and that impact always depends on factors other than effectiveness, i.e. the context. By healthy content, she means content whose effectiveness does not fizzle out, i.e. which has a lasting effect in different situations. It is important that effectiveness can be measured, even if it can be difficult to determine the measurement parameters and the relevance of different factors in individual cases.↵

2. I understand this dichotomy of effectiveness and quality based on the role of standards, which we have encountered on several occasions in content strategy. I would like to continue with an idea that is also essentially present in Hyde: quality, unlike effectiveness, cannot be determined quantitatively, but can only be determined in relation to standards. Whether something is “good” can only be understood in relation to normative guidelines. The standards on which the creation of the content is based can be described as the normative specifications. We call something good when it meets a standard. Nevertheless, it is of course very difficult to determine where quality lies in detail.

What comes to mind here is the concept of quality without a name that Christopher Alexander speaks of. One can only speak to a limited extent, if at all, about measuring or measurability of quality. (During our presence week 2016 in London, we were able to attend two presentations from companies that produce software that helps organizations comply with standards: ActiveStandards and Acrolinx .)↵