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FIELD-CONFIGURING EVENTS: ARENAS FOR INNOVATION AND LEARNING?

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Field-configuring events and their impact upon organizations, networks and organizational fields have become an important focal point for research. Since the coining of the term (Meyer *et al.*, 2005; Lampel & Meyer, 2008), the body of research on events such as trade fairs, conferences, or festivals has grown in different disciplinary contexts, particularly *management and organization studies* and *economic geography*. The general gist of these studies is that interactions at temporally and spatially bounded sites are marked by “predictable unpredictability” (Lampel, 2011) and “allow disparate constituents to become aware of their common concerns, join together, share information, coordinate their actions, shape or subvert agendas, and mutually influence field structuration” (Anand & Jones, 2008, p. 1037).

Research on organized events more broadly has a longer tradition in the two disciplines (for an overview, see Müller-Seitz & Schübler, 2013 and Schübler & Sydow, 2013). Previous work in management and organization studies has examined events such as board meetings, strategy meetings or committees on an organizational level as sites for strategy making (e.g. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). On a field level, Rao (1994) has examined certification contests as a way of legitimization new organizational forms and Zilber (2007) studied conferences as occasions for making sense of disrupted industry. Research on creative industries has perceived events like festivals or award ceremonies as sites for the negotiation of values (e.g. Moeran & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2011).

In economic geography, trade fairs have been conceptualized as temporary clusters (Maskell *et al.*, 2006) and cyclical events (Power & Jansson, 2008), playing an important role in structuring global business exchanges. This literature has elucidated that trade fairs not only afford opportunities for acquiring knowledge through face-to-face interaction, but also for obtaining information by observing and monitoring other participants (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2010). Trade

fairs, it is argued, create a dense ecology of information and communication flows that provides opportunities for the exploration of market trends and the generation and maintenance of networks (e.g. Schuldt & Bathelt, 2011).

In both disciplines, the main advantage of using the field-configuring event concept lies in its explicit focus on the configuration of *fields*. Broadly defined, organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148) are “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life”. Since such a recognized area of institutional life can emerge through being bound together in a particular industry context, but also by shared systems of norms and beliefs, the term institutional field is sometimes preferred as a more open conceptualization (Thornton *et al.*, 2012). Common to all field approaches is the idea that agents are embedded in networks of social relations that shape their actions (Bourdieu, 1990). For economic geographers, the attractiveness of the field-configuring event concept lies exactly in this relational perspective, which moves beyond the rather descriptive concepts of temporary and cyclical clusters towards an analysis of social processes and dynamics unfolding among institutionally embedded actors (Lange *et al.*, 2014).

Despite the recent emphasis on field maintenance as a possible outcome of serial field-configuring events (Schübler & Sydow, 2013; Schübler *et al.*, 2014b), research on events in management and organization studies has largely studied to their potential to generate novelty. Economic geographers, in contrast, have mostly emphasized the role of recurring events for processes knowledge acquisition, idea generation and the exploration of market trends on a firm level (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2010; Schuldt & Bathelt, 2011). Bringing these different strands of literature together, our aim in this Special Issue is to systematize our understanding of field-configuring events as arenas for innovation and learning. Our analysis hereby focuses on three

core questions. First, what are the specific *modes* of learning and knowledge exchange that generate innovation at field-configuring events in different contexts? Second, what *types* of innovation and learning outcomes can emerge from field-configuring events? And third, what are the *sites* at which innovation and learning takes place in relation to field-configuring events? The studies compiled in this Special Issue provide answers to these questions, while raising new issues and indicating avenues for further research.

The Contributions of this Special Issue

Modes of Innovation and Learning: A Specification of Interaction Effects

Research on field-configuring events has mainly paid attention to the characteristics of interactions unfolding among event participants *during* events as a central driver of learning and knowledge exchange. To start with, we comprehend learning as the predominantly intentional undertaking of individuals, teams or organizations to acquire new or deepen existing knowledge or skills. But learning is by no means only about the process of acquiring explicit knowledge; it also entails the exchange of knowledge in the form of transferring and disseminating tacit knowledge ([Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995](#)) to inform others, enable learning, exert power, and legitimize one's own actions ([Müller-Seitz & Güttel, 2014](#)). Studies often highlight the exceptional character of interactions at events, for actors that usually do not meet in a common arena can initiate relationships and acquire knowledge that otherwise would have been impossible or at least unlikely to gain (e.g. [Borghini et al., 2006](#); [Hardy & Maguire, 2010](#)). Such exchanges might be particularly important where knowledge is sensitive and can only be openly exchanged within a closed environment ([Müller-Seitz & Güttel, 2014](#)).

Existing research has also stressed the role of uncertainty as a central condition under which learning and knowledge exchange at events unfolds. Möllering (2010), for instance, shows how conference participants in the semiconductor industry developed new collective practices of creating knowledge to cope with the uncertainty in fast-changing markets (see also [Zilber, 2011](#)). Dobusch and Schüßler (2014) argue that conferences are sites for regulatory conversations where actors in the music industry present their competing visions for the uncertain future of the music industry. Moreover, the literature on creative industry events repeatedly relates the centrality of fairs and festivals to the principal uncertainty in the valuation of creative products ([Lampel, 2011](#)). In all of these studies, some form of *sense-making* in search for new meanings and solutions is a key mode of learning ([Garud, 2008](#); [Oliver & Montgomery, 2008](#)). These learning processes are not linear, however, but best characterized as undirected and serendipitous ([Bathelt and Gibson, 2013](#)).

The papers in our Special Issue add two aspects of learning and knowledge exchange that so far remain understudied: the temporal dimension of learning from past events and the embeddedness dimension of learning from local stakeholders.

Thiel and Grabher elucidate how learning from past failures in the course of hosting Olympic Games was made possible by engaging in knowledge transfer activities across host cities and their institutions. In effect, the involved institutions, right from the beginning prepared for hosting the mega-event of the Olympic Games *and* planned the post-event future to assure a beneficial legacy of the Games for the various stakeholders involved. To capture the different and nested temporalities that exceed the temporal boundaries of the event, the authors analyze the complex ‘project ecology’ ([Grabher, 2002; 2004](#)) that was in charge of planning the event and make the provisions for lasting positive legacies of the event.

Leca, Ruling and Puthod particularly illustrate the critical role of conflicts as drivers of change in the case of the Annecy International Animation Festival. The authors perceive the role of the local level not from the traditional point of view of how field-configuring events impact upon the local actors, but rather from the novel angle of how local actors drive change and exert an impact upon the field-configuring event. Put differently, Leca and colleagues point out that an event's local embeddedness is critical to understand its trajectory. In this spirit, the authors allude to the ability to transform conflicts productively into fundamental changes of the event's identity and scope in order to retain its status as a key venue for innovation and learning. Moreover, Leca, Ruling and Puthod add further evidence to the notion that heterarchy affords a mode of governance in which conflicts and tensions, rather than obstacles, are key drivers of change and innovation (Grabher, 1993; Stark, 2009; Grabher & Thiel, 2014).

Types of Innovation and Learning: Beyond Commercial and Institutional Aspects

In the present context, an innovation can refer to products, services, processes, managerial practices or organizational structures that are developed and placed in the market (see [Tidd & Bessant, 2013](#)). Consequently, it appears apposite to distinguish different dimensions of innovation as well as different levels on which innovation takes place as a result of field-configuring events. Much of the existing research in organization studies has focused on field-level institutional innovations as a collective outcome of field-configuring events. Hardy and Maguire (2010) as well as Schüßler *et al.* (2014b) study the impact of UN conferences on new transnational regulations. Garud (2008) outlines the emergence of a new technological standard for cochlear implants. Oliver and Montgomery (2008) examine the emergence of a new institutional logic in the Jewish legal profession. These studies tend to see event participants as

institutional entrepreneurs that mobilize different discursive or material strategies for shaping their institutional environments with dynamics of both contestation and convergence.

The management literature, in contrast, has studied how firms can use events to generate and disseminate new product innovations or how certain event formats can facilitate open innovation. On the one hand, events can be dramaturgically staged by firms to present new innovations to influence the evaluations of sponsors, investors, buyers or competitors in order to strengthen their commitment or even instigate enthusiasm ([Lampel, 2001](#)). In this regard, events are a mechanism of innovation diffusion. Conversely, events, particularly with a more open format, can provide inputs into the processes of generating innovation. *Lampel et al. (2012)*, for instance, examine design competitions that lead to knowledge sharing and learning when they use an open event format. The economic geography literature has mainly centered on how firms participating at trade fairs can gain informational inputs for their firm-level innovation processes.

The studies compiled in our Special Issue push beyond these two dimensions of either institutional or commercial innovations by highlighting the role of events for social innovations and innovations in more complex socio-technical systems.

Citroni focuses specifically on the potential of events to generate *social* innovations in a local field. Based on a study of 52 civic events in Milan's urban district Zone 4, he examines whether different community-level promoted social inclusion in the local community. He distinguishes between events that are geared towards the *consumption* of sociability and events that are aimed at *producing* sociability by involving community members in the set-up of the events. Over time, as the resources for organizing events declined, the first type of event became more widespread, with detrimental effects for social innovation. This study shows that a more open, participatory

event format is crucial for social innovation – unlike more closed event formats that might be needed for generating regulatory or diffusing commercial innovations.

Nissilä's study zooms in at the role of events in shaping new sustainable technology fields on a national level, a change that unfolds at the interface of commercial, institutional and social innovations. Using the concept of sustainability niches, she finds that a series of eight solar energy conferences in Finland allowed for both niche-internal and niche-external processes to intersect, thereby further stimulating the development of the niche. Niche-internal processes relate to the development of visions and expectations, the building of networks and the learning about sustainable technologies. Niche-external processes relate to the cognitive frames of regime actors and regulative aspects. *Nissilä's* study in essence indicates how field-configuring events can affect different elements of fields, ranging from relationships to socio-technical systems.

Sites of Innovation and Learning: Questioning the Intricate Relation between Event(s) and Field(s)

Lampel and Meyer (2008) elucidate the dual character of events as both outcomes of a field as well as an input into field configuration. The authors also distinguish events with a strong or weak “field mandate”, arguing that events typically acquire different levels of legitimacy within a particular field. Research in both management studies as well as economic geography so far has, more or less implicitly, privileged the study of events with a strong field mandate such as global mega-events like the Olympic Games (e.g., [Glynn, 2008](#)) or preeminent award ceremonies like the Grammy's (e.g., [Anand & Watson, 2004](#)). Moreover, both disciplines seem to be biased towards studies of a single event (or event series) in a singular field.

Up until more recently, only few studies have examined more complex ecologies of different events with different field mandates. The complex interdependencies between events and field(s) have been revealed, for instance, by [Schüßler *et al.* \(2014b\)](#) who found that a central field-configuring event series in the climate policy field not only included both “high stake” and “regular” events, but also transformed its embeddedness from one field towards many intersecting fields, with an increasingly unclear mandate. Schüßler *et al.* (2014a) study how event series in the German music industry compete for a strong field mandate. Dobusch & Müller-Seitz (2012) document how the Wikimedia organization – the formal organization that supports and administers websites such as Wikipedia – operates by means of an event-choreography. This choreography is sustained by gatherings at three different levels, starting from the grass-roots level in the form of regular local meet-ups to rotating events on a national and global scale.

The contributions to the special issue address yet a different set of issues, asking not *which events* are configuring a particular field, but *which particular fields* are configured by events.

Thiel and Grabher, for example, unravel how the single event of the London Olympic Games has, albeit to varying degrees, lasting repercussions for a multitude of fields. The dual focus on both the temporary event as well as its legacies has attracted significant attention in ongoing debates in the mega-event policy field; managerial and organizational practices employed in the planning and building of the Games’ venues have defined a new set of best practices in the mega-project construction field; and finally, London presumably will turn into model of how to leverage local development through mega-events in the urban regeneration field.

Additionally, both the papers by *Citroni* and *Leca et al.* remind us of the repercussions that the specific mode of involvement of local stakeholders has for the kinds of innovation and learning emanating from events.

Towards a More Contextualized Understanding of Field Configuration Dynamics

An often-levied criticism against the field-configuring event concept is that it lacks conceptual focus and, consequently, explanatory value. We suggest that explanatory power can be gained by specifying modes, types, and sites of innovation and learning emanating from field-configuring events (see Figure 1). Regarding the *modes* of innovation and learning, it is not only important to differentiate different dynamics unfolding from the interactions during field-configuring events, but to pay attention to past events as well as to the conflicts immanent in the organization of an event. Regarding the *types* of innovation and learning, field-configuring events can be an important driver for generating or disseminating commercial innovations, they can support institutional work or they can facilitate social innovations by defining new practices for social interaction. Regarding the *sites* of innovation and learning, events can affect both the local, geographical field in which they are embedded as well as broader industry, policy or issue-based fields, summarized here as institutional fields. Importantly, innovation and learning also takes place on the level of event organization in terms of developing new formats, for instance. Innovations on this level are deeply interwoven with the possibility to affect learning and innovation on other levels, i.e. to maintain an event's field-configuring potential.

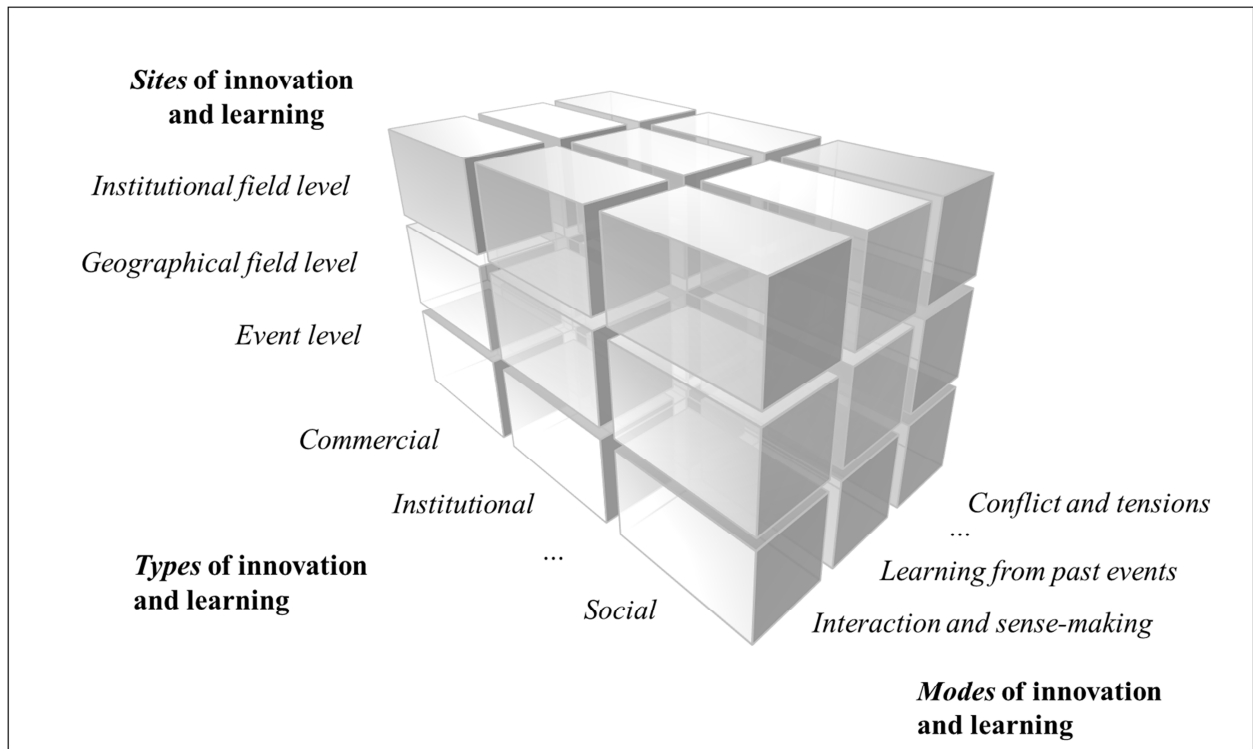


Figure 1: Modes, types and sites of innovation and learning at field-configuring events

A key insight of this collection is that most events involve several points of these three dimensions simultaneously. This suggests that the field-configuring impact of events cannot simply be captured as either field-creating, field-changing or field-maintaining. Rather, a more thorough differentiation of field configuration according to the multiple contexts in which events are embedded and which they affect seems pertinent. Analogous to the embeddedness of temporary projects in a more permanent “project ecology” ([Grabher, 2002](#); [2004](#); [Grabher & Ibert, 2011](#)), temporary field-configuring events rely on a multidimensional ecology typically made up organizing bodies, a range of specialized service providers, industry associations, local stakeholders and volunteers ([Chen, 2012](#)). The particular architecture of such event ecologies channels resources from a variety of sources and, conversely, feeds back innovation and learning impacts to these sources.

Further research could continue to unpack the modes and types of innovation and learning unfolding at different levels. A particularly fruitful approach for further research would be to examine the temporal dynamics in which these modes and types of innovation and learning unfold in relation to the different contexts touched by events.

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