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Call for papers – Special Issue

From informal to formal: How is the knowledge produced by communities appropriated by their parent company?

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As early as 1986, in his famous book *Complex Organizations*, Perrow suggested that we were living in a society of organisations whose characteristics challenged these traditional organisational mechanisms. Thus, several authors (Paula & Scheinkman, 2007; Cheney et al., 2014), defend a new vision of the company as a social entity endowed with both a formal dimension of inclusion and an informal and emergent dimension based on the interpersonal links of its members. Several authors emphasise the complex and changing entanglement of these relationships and stress the need to take both aspects into account in order to have a complete understanding of the organisation (McEvily, Soda, & Tortoriello, 2014).

While the formal dimension of organizations (control and incentive systems, authority structures to arbitrate conflicts, creation of negotiation spaces, Nickerson & Zenger, 2004) guarantees the reliability and reproducibility of procedures and routines, the organic and informal structures are associated with flexibility, innovation and the creation of new knowledge (capitalization on good practices, solving problems, developing new ideas, Goglio et al. 2020). The literature on knowledge communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Amin &

Cohendet, 2004; Amin & Roberts, 2008) is consistent with this vision and proposes that the creation and development of new knowledge takes place in communities, while the implementation and systematisation of this knowledge is carried out in formal structures. These knowledge communities are groups of people linked by common interests, practices or passions, who interact and exchange information regularly, mainly in an informal and unorganised way, and outside the usual lines of authority.

These communities have been described as effective means of fostering individual and collective learning (Wulandhari et al., 2021), collaborative problem solving (Orr, 1990, Yström & Agogué, 2020, Carton et al., 2021), collaborative innovation (Kodama, 2015) and social innovation (Mulgan, 2006), through the sharing and creation of knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

The separation of cognitive tasks between the company formal structures and its knowledge communities raises the question of how the two are coordinated. This question is the objective of this special issue, which aims to understand:

- What mechanisms enable the knowledge generated in the communities to be validated and appropriated by the formal structure of their organization?

The problem of combining and adapting managerial and community logics involves managing the delicate balance between self-organisation and control (Agterberg et al., 2008; Harvey, et al., 2013, Carton et al., 2018). The challenge is to avoid the risk of killing the production of new knowledge (Durisin & Torodova, 2012, Bootz, 2015; Borzillo et al., 2008; Dupouët & Barlatier, 2011), while preserving the autonomy and internal functioning of communities (Goglio et al., 2023; Crespín-Mazet et al., 2023, Bootz & Lièvre, 2023). Communities can also be spaces that diverge from the company's strategy, where innovation takes on a different meaning, or where the knowledge produced remains trapped and does not reach outside the community (Goglio et al., 2023; Crespín-Mazet et al., 2023).

To overcome these difficulties, the literature proposes five main coordination mechanisms between formal and informal structures.

Firstly, the integration of intrapreneurship into the community approach. In this case, community members with ideas receive support from their company to turn them into reality. The company provides valuable assistance by setting up incubation resources (e.g. rapid

prototyping resources and methods) to transform ideas into competitive achievements (Sarazin, Cohendet, Simon, 2017). This support does not amount to control: the formal structure does not impose the direction to be taken but chooses the ideas it is interested in and supports them. It can also set up recognition processes to legitimise the contributions of member-intrapreneurs to innovation (Sarazin, Cohendet, Simon, 2017).

In the second case, informal communities develop in the interstices of the formal structure. Consequently, if managers act on the formal structure, they will mechanically influence the informal structure (Clement & Puranam, 2017; Gulati & Puranam, 2009; Nickerson & Zenger, 2002; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). However, this mechanism cannot work when knowledge communities produce new knowledge that is not aligned with management.

In the third case, it is a matter of ensuring that the objectives of the company and the communities are aligned, while leaving the community free to organise itself as it wishes without stifling their self-organised dimension (McDermott & Archibald, 2010). Boundary work and actors can facilitate the dissemination and appropriation of new knowledge by decision-makers (Wenger, 1998; Schulte et al., 2020), and even by other communities in the case of membership of several communities.

The fourth solution is to set up community governance based on the roles of coordinator and sponsor (McDermott and Archibald 2010, Probst and Borzillo 2007, 2008). The risk is that the truly 'community' character of the communities disappears. Management may then regard communities as departments or project groups that can be managed in the traditional way. Communities engaged in exploratory activities may not be supported in this way because their activity does not resonate with the formal structure.

In these solutions, the precise mechanisms by which communities can be articulated with the formal structure and how their knowledge can be incorporated into the formal structures remain relatively unexplained.

More recently, some authors have suggested a 5th form of co-ordination via the creation by the company of boundary structures to align the results of the communities with the organisation's strategy and to negotiate their acceptance by senior managers. They are positioned between the formal layer of the organisation and its informal layer (communities) in order to ensure coordination and strategic alignment between the two.

Applying the work on creative cities to business, Cohendet et al (2010) refer to the notion of the middleground. The literature on creative cities has shown that local innovation is based on the existence of three creative layers that complement each other in exploring and exploiting knowledge (Simon, 2009; Cohendet and Zapata 2009; Cohendet et al., 2010): the upperground made up of companies, organisations and formal institutions (research laboratories, universities, cultural and artistic centres, etc.), the middleground (communities, clubs, associations, knowledge platforms) and the underground (actors engaged informally in creative, scientific, technological and artistic activities).

While Cohendet and Simon apply the underground, middleground model to the enterprise, others (Crespin, Goglio, Dupouet, Neukam, 2024) speak of a boundary structure with semi-formal characteristics: (formal) objectives and performance indicators, sponsorship of the organisation (no hierarchical links with the rest of the organisation), self-organisation, dual membership of their members (communities and semi-formal structure) giving them their internal legitimacy.

In this special issue, we explore the classical hierarchical formal enterprise and knowledge communities (Amin & Roberts, 2008) such as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, Pyrko et al, 2019), epistemic communities (Haas, 1992), knowledge communities (Boland & Tenkasi 1995), collaborative communities (Heckscher & Adler, 2006), creative communities (Sawnhey & Prandelli 2000), innovation communities (Lynn et al., 1997), user communities (von Hippel, 1986) and open source communities (Dahlander & Magnusson, 2005; Schaarschmidt et al.,2015, Viseur & Charleux, 2019).

We aim to bring together papers that provide empirical substance and conceptual clarity (theoretical papers) by addressing several research questions on the relationships between knowledge communities and formal structures such as:

Control vs. autonomy:

- What management mechanisms are needed to ensure that the community's work is aligned with the company's objectives? What are the consequences of non-alignment for the community?
- How can a company support a community without necessarily expecting an immediate return?
- How can the company support community initiatives without controlling them and making them its ownership?

Appropriation of community productions:

- How does the knowledge developed in informal communities move into formal structures and get adopted?
- How is the knowledge produced by the communities validated and appropriated by the formal organisation (by whom and using what levers)?
- What mechanisms enable the knowledge generated in the communities to be validated and appropriated by the formal structure?
- How can we move from the production of ideas and knowledge to their integration into the organisation's innovation process?
- What is the role of boundary actors and/or innovation intermediaries in the transfer of knowledge from a community to its parent company?
- What is the role of internal boundary structures in aligning community results with the organisation's strategy and in negotiating their acceptance by management?

Valuing community work:

- How does the formal structure value community output (methods and mechanisms for assessing value)?
- How does the formal structure value its employees' membership of and/or contribution to a community (leader, member, sponsor, etc.)?
- How can the value of communities be demonstrated for members, outsiders and the organisation?

Parent company support for its communities:

- What is the role of a corporate community programme in supporting communities? Can it act as a boundary structure between the communities and the formal organisation?
- What profile and qualities are essential for a leader to lead and support a community?
- What is the role of a sponsor in supporting and enhancing communities?
- What management mechanisms can support the development of innovative practices within knowledge communities?

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Timetable for submission and acceptance of papers:

- **30 september 2025:** Deadline for complete manuscripts through online paper submission:

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