

# Path Dependencies in Project-Based Organizing – Evidence from Television Production in Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Project-based organizing is sometimes seen as a panacea against strategic persistence and structural inertia. This paper argues that, due to stable relations and timeworn routines in particular, these persistencies also arise in project organizations, even in project networks and project ecologies, which are often considered even more flexible forms of project-based organizing. Taking the example of the German television industry, the paper shows that some of these persistencies may even amount to path dependencies that are quite contradictory from an economic perspective. While it seems highly efficient to follow and exploit an organizational path chosen, this very path may also lead to a lock-in.

KEY WORDS: television, project management, path dependence, inertia, flexibility,

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## **MORE FLEXIBILITY THROUGH PROJECTS?**

The “projectification” of organizations, industries, regions, and even societies (Midler, 1995; Sahlin-Anderson & Söderholm, 2002) is usually welcomed by managers and policy makers alike, because it promises the creativity and flexibility needed to survive in increasingly “turbulent environments” (Emery & Trist, 1965). Despite this increased need for more flexible structures and the substantial potential of the respective organizational forms such as projects and networks, there is at the very same time an urgent demand for continuity in and across organizations so that economic activities can be carried out in an efficient and reliable way. Providing this continuity and stability is one of the major managerial challenges for project-based organizing, since projects – as “temporary systems” (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995) – are often rather short-lived and dynamic. However, projects are often embedded in more permanent systems: organizations, networks, and/or organizational fields (Manning, 2008). These may provide the necessary continuity and stability, if projects are tied to these more than temporary systems in an appropriate way. Because of these provisions for continuity and stability, projects, often in interaction with the more enduring systems they are embedded in, may be leaning towards persistencies – despite their seemingly “born flexible” character. Under specific circumstances, some of these persistencies may even amount to path dependencies.

What exactly are the sources of persistencies and, possibly, path dependencies and how do these actually arise in project-based organizing? Taking the example of content production for television, this paper argues that even in the TV industry, which operates without doubt in a project mode and can certainly be characterized as a turbulent field, fixed routines and long-standing relations are absolutely necessary and actually *used* in practice to achieve efficiency and reliability. On the other hand,

the very character of these routines and relations constitutes, even for this form and even in this dynamic field, a seedbed of organizational persistencies that, under specific circumstances, amount to organizational path dependencies. In consequence, the assumption that “project networks” (Sydow & Windeler, 1999), and “project ecologies” (Grabher, 2005) will *not* show tendencies towards persistencies and path dependency may be questioned.

This mainly conceptual paper, that tries to attract attention to a formerly unacknowledged phenomenon in project-based organizing, proceeds as follows. The following section defines and differentiates, organizational persistencies and path dependencies, relating them to selected theories with the potential to sensitize for such phenomena in project-based organizing. Then, it presents some empirical evidence from the TV industry in Germany, the second largest in the world. The evidence suggests that the persistencies of projects and project networks, sometimes even in the form of path dependencies, result from stable routines and standing relations that are necessary to guarantee the efficiency and reliability of project-based organizing. The discussion and conclusion part of the paper argues that persistencies and path dependencies are multi-level phenomena and that the recursive interplay of stabilizing processes on different levels reaching from the single project to the ecological field have to be taken into account. In consequence, the more project routines and relations lead to rigidities the more they are embedded in *more or less inert* project networks and project ecologies – and vice versa. Based upon this reasoning, some directions for future research and managerial practice are outlined.

## **UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL PATH DEPENDENCIES**

Strategic persistencies, operational rigidities or “structural inertia” (Hannan & Freeman, 1984) are a necessary by-product if not a central outcome of organizing. Formal structures, but also informal cultures, tend not only to become inert over time but rather at an increasing rate. The reasons are manifold: resource interdependencies and rule complementarities, shared views and norms, tight contracts and specific investments on the one hand, and the relative isolation of an organization from its environment on the other. Such reasons have particularly been emphasized by organizational ecology (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), but also by many other theories of organization that account for processes such as ‘imprinting’ or ‘institutionalization’ leading to rather stable organizational structures and cultures (Scott, 2001; Johnson, 2007). In case these persistencies are characterized by path dependencies, theorizing has to go beyond these conventional approaches focusing on inertia and institutionalization.

### **Routines and Relations as Necessary Conditions**

Most of these theories of organization see routines as an important means to stabilize organizational practices. In part, routines intersect with resource interdependencies and rule complementarities, shared views and norms, tight contracts, specific investments and so forth, but they are also an effective means to stabilize organizational practices on their own. Thus, routines, and the same is true for stable relations, help organizations to master tasks efficiently and to guarantee the reliability, accountability, and legitimacy of the enterprise. On the other hand, these very routines and relations, because of being a potential source of persistences,

rigidities and inertia, are considered a likely threat to organizational survival, in particular in turbulent fields.

Though projects are usually thought of as a more flexible form of organizing *per se*, the same dilemma of balancing needs for stability and flexibility confronts project managers (see, more generally, Huxham & Beech 2000; and with respect to the media business Achtenhagen & Raviola 2007 and DeFillippi 2009). Despite the fact that every routine or practice – and every social relation – may be challenged by an agent in face of the omnipresent “dialectic of control” (Giddens, 1984), they tend to be reproduced and, thereby, stabilized further in what may be called a path-dependent process. This is particularly likely if the project itself, as well as the immediate ‘environment’ the project is embedded in, is characterized by elements of continuity rather than discontinuity. The former is the case when projects are complex and long-lasting. Consider, for example, the instance of building a new airport terminal or an Olympic stadium, which sometimes takes several years to complete. The latter is the case if the project is embedded in an organization or in a project network that both provide a more enduring project context. Such ‘embedding’ contexts tend to support the development and continuation of project routines and project relations.

### **Theorizing Path Dependencies**

Under specific circumstances, strategic persistencies, operational rigidities and structural inertia may lead to a project, especially if it is embedded into a rather stable project organization or network that drags it into a “lock-in” (David, 1985). In this case, the action corridor narrows and alternative modes of (organizing) action vanish.

The result is not only decreased flexibility but irreversibility of a particular project routine, a project relation, or the entire project conduct. But when and under which circumstances do such persistencies in project organizing turn into organizational path dependencies potentially leading into a lock-in?

The theory of path dependence (David, 1985; Arthur, 1994), developed to explain the irreversibility of some technologies, most prominently of the QWERTY key board, is capable of answering this question. For in the meantime, this theory has been modified and applied not only to institutions (North, 1990; Thelen 1999; Pierson, 2000) but also to organizations and interorganizational networks (Sydow, Schreyögg & Koch, 2009). The theory of organizational path dependence does not only provide the concept of a lock-in, but also explains when and why path dependency arises and, eventually, a lock-in occurs.

In somewhat more detail, and especially adapted to the analysis of organizational processes, this theory distinguishes three phases:

Phase I: Singular events, small or big, occur within or between organizations. Some of these are selected by agents and signified as 'important' or 'suitable' and, hence, stipulate related actions. The selectivity in this phase is assumed to increase but the process would still be reversible.

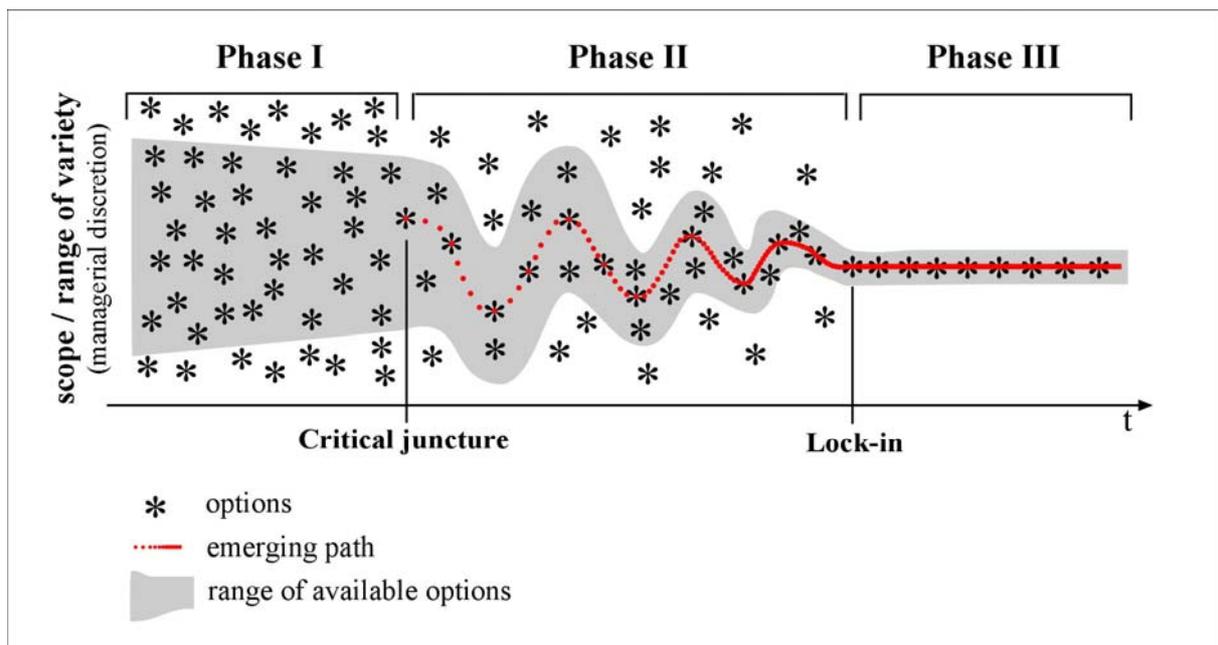
Phase II: At so-called "critical junctures" (Collier & Collier, 1991), these events or respective actions trigger self-reinforcing dynamics that lead to the emergence of an organizational path. In this phase the process gains a momentum that makes it increasingly difficult to reverse.

Phase III: These dynamics, at least potentially, may lead the system – the project, the organization, or the network – into an organizational lock-in that may still be profitable

but, from a strategic perspective, is always problematic (Koch, 2008; Sydow et al., 2009).

Figure 1 illustrates these three phases in the constitution of an organizational path, showing not only that, in sharp contrast to the original conceptualization, history already matters in the pre-formation phase but that some choices also remain possible in the lock-in phase. One explanation for this less deterministic conceptualization of a lock-in is the omnipresent dialectic of control that implies that individual as well as corporate agents may always behave otherwise, also in terms of perception and interpretation.

Figure 1. The constitution of an organizational path (Sydow et al., 2009)



At the heart of the theory of organizational path dependence are the self-reinforcing mechanisms that narrow the corridor of alternative actions and, at least potentially, drive a system, temporary or permanent, towards a lock-in. The most important mechanisms that cause such positive feedback loops are economies of scale and scope, coordination and complementarity effects, adaptive expectations and single-

loop learning (cf. Sydow et al., 2009). One or a combination of these self-reinforcing mechanisms causes an organizational path to gain momentum and, thereby, to turn increasingly irreversible.

Another important insight of the theory of organizational path dependence is the unpacking of the paradox that it is often efficient to create, join and keep on a certain organizational path, but that at the very same time the identical self-reinforcing mechanism that leads to these positive outcomes in form of “increasing returns” (Arthur, 1994) ensures that it will become more and more difficult and, at some point in time, almost impossible to leave or break the path. Conceived this way, it becomes clear that all path dependencies *appear* as persistencies but that certainly not all rigidities or inertia can be explained by organizational path dependencies. For the former are *not* necessarily driven by a self-reinforcing mechanism; instead they may result from the imprinting by the founding entrepreneur or the conditions of organizational founding (cf. Johnson, 2007), for instance. In both cases, it remains however unclear how these ‘imprints’ are reproduced over time.

In any case and very much like persistencies, organizational path dependencies have not simply to be avoided but represent a dilemma that has to be managed. However, because of the often hidden dynamics of path dependence (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2009), this seems to be even more demanding than ‘managing’ persistencies. For one thing, organizational path dependencies are easily overlooked or misinterpreted as (simple) persistencies. Even if they are identified and recognized as path dependencies, their management remains challenging, because – at least from the perspective of the theory of organizational path dependence outlined above – they are not only at least as contradictory as organizational persistencies, but also extremely difficult to steer. From the perspective of this theory that centers on the role

of self-reinforcing mechanisms, the enacting, influencing and shaping of self-reinforcing mechanisms are nevertheless at the heart of managing path dependencies (see also Koch, 2008, investigating German quality newspapers).

## **PROJECT PATHS IN THE TELEVISION INDUSTRY – SOME EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM GERMANY**

Several studies have been conducted in the German television industry, mostly together with my colleague Arnold Windeler. First, two major German media regions, Cologne and Berlin, were studied in some depth using semi-structured interviews along with analysis of documents and the trade press. Both regions turned out, at least with respect to this industry, to be project ecologies characterized by more and less institutional thickness respectively (Lutz, Sydow & Staber, 2003). Second, the same data were used to develop the concept of the project network and to study its relationship with changing industry practices (Sydow & Windeler, 1999; Windeler & Sydow, 2001; Manning, 2005; Sydow, 2006). Third, the project networks of two major TV production firms were studied over a period of six years using structural network analysis and semi-structured interviews. In addition, two TV movies produced by these two firms and their networks were investigated in depth and in real time, using interviews with all major agents involved and making some site visits (Manning & Sydow, 2006, 2007). In the three studies carried out between 1996 and 2003, a total of almost 100 semi-structured interviews were conducted, dozens of written documents analyzed, and even some participant observations made. The semi-structured interviews that were held with broadcasters, producers, directors, providers of artistic and technical services, union representatives, and regional development agencies nevertheless provided the backbone of these studies; they

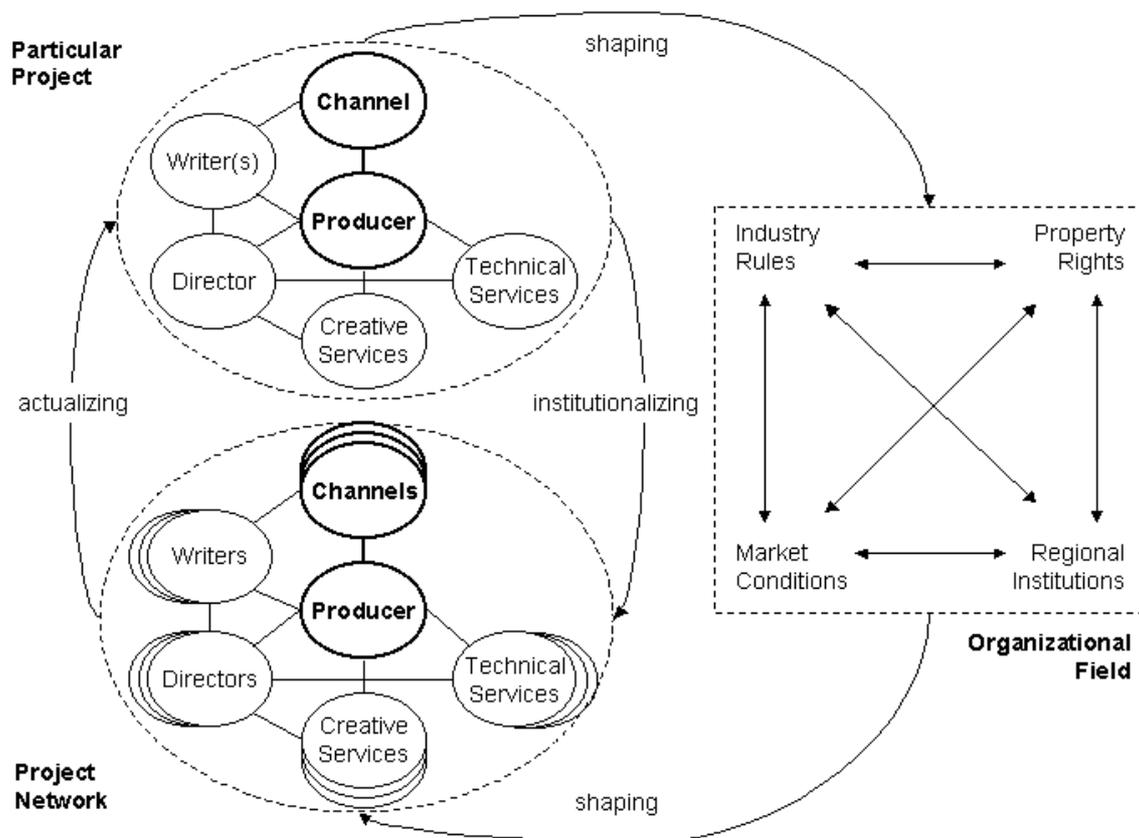
lasted on average one hour, were transcribed, coded and then analyzed by at least two researchers.

From these empirical studies, all pursuing a structuration approach (cf. Giddens, 1984; Windeler & Sydow, 2001; Sydow, 2006), three of the applied concepts are relevant for answering the question this paper poses, namely: what are, the sources of persistencies and, possibly, path dependencies and how exactly do these phenomena arise in project-based organizing? The three concepts, i.e. project networks, project relationships, and project routines, commonly address the tension between flexibility and stability. The same is true of a fourth concept – project ecology – adopted from Grabher (2005).

### **Project Networks and Project Ecologies**

Project *networks* are conceived as an organizational form of production and exchange among functionally interdependent but legally autonomous organizations and/or individual agents that come together for a limited time and yet coordinate their activities in the light of their past project experiences and potential future projects. In both respects, and this has to be emphasized from a structuration perspective, the agents refer to established sets of relations and practices *beyond* the ongoing project. So while projects are without doubt “temporary systems” (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995), project networks should be considered “more than just temporary systems” (Sydow & Windeler, 1999).

Figure 2. A project network in an organizational field (Manning & Sydow, 2007)



As Figure 2 illustrates, the members of a particular project are recruited via established sets of relationships resulting from former projects and institutionalized as a resource ‘pool’ (↑). Being recruited for and becoming engaged in a particular project, in turn (↓) helps to actualize and reproduce and, eventually, transform this set of relationships and practices for the entire project network. Conceived this way, project networks resemble “latent organizations” (Starkey, Barnatt & Tempest, 2000), which “bind together configurations of key actors in ongoing relationships that become active/manifest as and when new projects demand” (299), thus providing “a source of continuity that counteracts the conditions of impermanence and change under which project firms operate” (Ferriani, Corrado & Boschetti, 2005: 262 referring to Starkey et al., 2000 and others). While such a network organization may result from the intentional bundling of contracts for several projects and thus represent a

specific form of relational contracting, we find that in this particular industry it more often than not is an emergent property. The resulting project network, like singular projects as well as the acting individuals and organizations, is embedded in organizational fields (see again Figure 2). I will come back to this embeddedness and its relevance to path dependencies later.

One example of the producer firms we studied in depth and that is deeply embedded in a project network is Hood Production (HP; names and some other details have been changed in order to guarantee anonymity), one of the major producers of television programs in Germany churning out mainly TV series and movies based upon detective stories. Despite its economic importance for the German TV industry, HP has remained a small firm with very few permanent employees, more than half of it producers. This firm could and can remain small because it employs several hundred individuals in simultaneous production projects and sources many artistic and technical services from external providers. In this respect, HP practices the counter-model to the formerly integrated Hollywood studio system (Lampel & Shamsie, 2003; Scott, 2005).

Despite relying on the – allegedly – flexible project network form of organizing, however, it turns out to be quite difficult for HP, first, to produce other formats than mainly detective stories and, second, to serve not only public but also the private broadcasters that have gained economic importance during the last two decades:

*“We have become, to a large extent, a victim of our own success in [serial] detective movies. We have actually produced and marketed a lot in other sectors, but the greatest successes have always been in [serial] detective movies. [...] We can’t get rid of this.” (CEO of HP)*

*“I think that HP is strongly dependent on Channel A because they make most productions for us. [...] In turn, of course, there is a dependence on HP because we have not acquired any more detective movies from other companies. In fact, as far as German detective movies are concerned, we say: ‘Not any more, except the ones with HP.’ (Editor of Channel A)*

The respective strategic persistence of the firm seems to result from the very networks of relations and, probably even more important, from the routinized practices that HP is embedded in. For instance, at the time of our investigation, the relationships to private broadcasters were not as good as those to the leading public ones. Because of this, it was difficult for HP to be chosen by the former as an 'independent producer'. A major reason for this inertia was that HP was economically extremely successful in winning sufficient contracts in the "public world" (Windeler & Sydow, 2001). In consequence, HP has not learned to adapt to the quite specific demands of private broadcasters, including building relationships with service providers that would also be able to do so. These demands do concern programs tailored to the needs of private channels. What is more important though is that the production of such programs would need somewhat different routines and relations to other creative talent.

Following the theory of organizational path dependence, the resulting strategic persistence and structural inertia of the production firm *and* its network can at least in part be interpreted as a lock-in mainly caused by complementarity and learning effects, leaving little room for strategic manoeuvring. This is evidenced by several attempts made by HP to consciously break the path of producing almost exclusively detective stories for broadcasters from the public world. But these attempts, that included recruiting an experienced producer from an organization that is mainly active in private world of German television, failed (cf. Manning & Sydow, 2006).

Project networks or latent organizations are to be found in organizational fields that, given a wide diffusion of this organizational form, may well be considered project *ecologies* (Grabher, 2005). At least in the TV industry, agents and the respective sets of relationships are likely to be locally concentrated in media regions. In the case of

Germany in and around Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg and Munich they are even considered to constitute 'media clusters'. One important reason is that the efficiency of content production for television does not only depend upon the structures found in the particular project and the project network and how the agents refer to them in their practices. Rather it depends also on the structures and institutions of the TV industry in general (Windeler & Sydow, 2001) and of the respective media region or cluster, where the network is situated, in particular (Lutz et al., 2003). Take for instance training institutions, for which funding is often provided by the regional government, where such institutions, together with the field practices, operate in the background and contribute – not least by creating stability – to the efficiency of this organizational form. Figure 2 illustrates this recursive relationship between project networks and organizational fields, which would also have to be analyzed not only with respect to regional institutions but also prevailing market conditions, industry rules and the protection of property rights.

These empirical findings and the respective theorizing indicate that project-based organizing is likely to influence the development of project networks and even the formation of the organizational field as (regional) project ecology. In turn, practices in the network and in the field are assumed to influence or even shape project-based organizing. This recursive relationship is expected to hold true with respect to both project relations and project routines that, under specific circumstances, are not only important sources of stability, but also of the path dependencies implied in the notion of project paths introduced below.

## **Project Relations and Project Routines**

Project *relations* form through processes of social interaction within and across projects. In the former case these relations connect individual or corporate actors and bind them to a particular project. When these relations cut across projects, they are likely to constitute project networks. Both types of project relations are an important stabilizing factor that supports project-based organizing in general and managing the tension between flexibility and stability that characterizes this organizational form in particular. However, as stated before, such relations are also a potential source of persistency or even path dependence.

Our own research and that of many others (e.g., Jones, 1996; Starkey et al., 2000; Ferriani et al., 2005; Antcliff, Saundry & Stuart, 2008; Wakabayashi, Yamashita & Yamada, 2009) actually shows that there is a significant proclivity of project participants in the film and television industry to reinforce social networks by repeating past collaborations. These 'repeated ties' that result from resource interdependencies and complementarities as well as from friendship and commitment are at the core of project networks or latent organizations and, as such, underpin the formation and dissolution of project teams in industries like television production. According to several empirical studies, 'strong' rather than 'weak' ties, especially the strength of the directors' relations with producers and distributors, seem to make artistic merit as well as economic success more likely (Starkey et al., 2000; Alvarez & Svenenova, 2002; Delmestri, Montanari & Usai, 2005). However, not all studies confirm this, but rather point to the fact that film projects with deeper prior relations often perform worse than those involving new partners (Sorenson & Waguespack, 2006). The simple reason is that some film projects require more change in project

teams and project practices than is possible when sticking with the same project members.

This contradiction may be dissolved further if one considers that even project networks in the rather dynamic and turbulent film and television industry are characterized by “stable constellations” (Manning & Sydow, 2006). These constellations do not change over a series of projects and are, as our data and those of others indicate, mainly made up of a key creative artist (e.g. director, script writer or main actor), the producer and the distributor/broadcasting editor. Despite the stability or even persistence arising from these constellations, for instance via the routines that these central actors develop for managing the project team and the project network, the concrete team and, in particular, the wider network remain quite flexible. Nevertheless, in the course of time these rather stable relations, often together with certain project routines, may be a source of persistencies or even path dependencies.

Project *routines*, often installed by actors in these stable constellations are – like project relations – constituted in or across projects. This is particularly the case if projects are managed within project networks or project ecologies. Feldman (2004) refers to the classical definition of organizational routines as repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent practices, but also stresses the inherent changing dynamics and the contingent nature of routines by highlighting the improvisational, i.e. performative aspect of these practices. The ostensive aspect may be codified as a standard operating procedure or effective as an informal script, whether embodied in a set of different artifacts or not. Even if one acknowledges the relevance of the performative aspect, this more structural component orientates the reproduction and,

thereby, makes the reinforcing of a particular routine likely (Mante & Sydow, 2009), presumably even in projects as temporary systems.

While projects certainly contain many routine elements (e.g., Davies & Brady, 2000) and thus are principally prone to reinforcement, they are not typically repeatable as a whole. But those repetitive, patterned practices that ‘survive’ beyond a single project, which may then become project *network* routines, are quite likely to contribute to the persistence or even path dependence of project-based organizing. This argument may even apply to the field level of analysis for which Lampel & Shamsie (2003) indicate the presence of an increasingly important shift towards more networked forms of organizing in the Hollywood film industry which is accompanied by what they call “mobilizing capabilities”. Such capabilities could be considered a kind of meta-routine, since they help to identify and commit critical resources, in particular creative talent to film projects, i.e. these routines ‘guide’ the development and application of lower-order practices. But like such very routines, meta- or higher-order-routines may also be prone to path dependence as van Driel and Dolfsma (2009) show in their investigation of the Toyota Production System. In their case study, the authors even put meta-routines close to self-reinforcing mechanisms.

An example from our own research that illustrates the persistent or even path-dependent nature of at least some field routines is the content producers’ practice of keeping the production “in the budget”. This requirement is particularly important in the public world of German TV. At the same time, it is this world that allows a subtle circumventing of the very budget constraints. Since experienced producers like HP act in rather stable constellations, these routines spread easily among the firms leading or co-leading the project or the project network. But they do not stay within the constellations comprising the most powerful actors in the project and the project

network but diffuse to other individual or corporate actors collaborating in the network and, finally, in the field. As a consequence, producers like HP and its associates develop a capability – or meta-routine – that keeps their firms and networks busy producing for public broadcasters only and/or sticking to a particular format. Once the practice has, in addition, diffused not only in the network and the field but also over time, it becomes increasingly hard to change, i.e. the producers with their project networks become inert or even locked-in to a certain project path.

### **Project Paths: Path Dependence in the Making**

Project *paths* denote a series of subsequent projects that develop their own pull as they are driven by self-reinforcing mechanisms and build a corridor of interaction sustained by practices of connecting present with past and potential future projects along certain task and team dimensions (Manning & Sydow, 2006). Such paths do not only define the scope of project contexts within which partners collaborate, but also the resources they can combine and the trust and capabilities they may exploit. Though differing in range, these paths necessarily imply not only persistencies but in face of the “economics of repetition” (Davies & Brady, 2000), “amplified reciprocity” (Gargiulo & Bennassi, 2000) and other self-reinforcing mechanisms like complementarity and learning effects, as well as organizational path dependencies. Thus, by definition, there are no project paths that do not imply path dependence and, thereby, a possible lock-in.

One important insight into this process of repetition and amplification is that strong ties may develop implying a high level of mutual trust or interdependence within a particular project relation or even within a project network. These ties may not only

“result in inertia and inhibit exchange *between* networks” (Antcliff et al., 2008: 376) but in a lock-in. The few empirical studies on the persistence of relations, though to my knowledge all conducted outside the media business, actually point to the fact that managers tend to even stick to continuously underperforming relationships (e.g., Delios, Inkpen & Ross, 2004; Patzelt & Shepherd, 2008).

Project relations and project routines, particularly as they co-evolve in project networks or even broader project ecologies, are seen here to be a primary seedbed of project paths. In more detail, ties surviving single projects and being repeated again and again provide a social context within which actors succeed not only in combining complementary resources and building trust, but also in sharing cognitive schemes and developing common norms. These, in turn, stabilize relations and routines within and across projects and provide project networks in particular with the stability they need for an efficient and reliable organization of production. From one point in time, however, the emerging project paths may become persistent and even locked-in. In anticipation of such a development, a need for incremental or even radical change may arise that, however, is not easy to achieve in face of a general lack of strategic attention noted for the TV industry not only in our research (see also Lundin & Norbäck, 2009).

Project paths are particularly likely to develop when a series of films is produced by a (project) organization or a (project) network, no matter whether the projects are developed from a sequence of detective stories (as in the case of HP) or derived from a number of books by the same author. Such project paths are – similar to structures that enable and constrain actions (Giddens, 1984) – both the result and the seedbed of action, in this case the organizing for production of content for television. New paths may be created principally from well-established paths, but as

the case of HP has demonstrated, this is anything but easy. Rather, all successful productions of this firm are more or less related to the present path (cf. Manning & Sydow, 2006).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS**

Projects carried out within organizations or cutting across organizations are typically considered a fairly flexible form of organizing. More often than not projects are even conceived as a form that helps to avoid core-competencies turn into core-rigidities by providing a 'foundation in experience' to inspire eventual changes (Leonard-Barton, 1992). However, as argued in this paper, even project-based organizing is prone to persistencies and, when self-reinforcing processes are at work, even to path dependencies. The argument has been developed theoretically with reference to some theories of organizations that highlight the importance of structural inertia for organizational efficiency and survival and, in particular, to a theory of organizational path dependence that, at its core, explains hyper-stable arrangements with reference to self-reinforcing processes, positive feedback or increasing returns. Empirically, the relevance of the argument has been shown with reference to the field of TV production in Germany, two production firms that are embedded in project networks and project ecology in two different media regions in particular.

Although also considered fairly dynamic and flexible, these contexts provide the necessary institutional stability, most of all – at least in this industry – with regard to relations and routines that may be a seedbed for persistencies and even path dependencies to arise. The more projects are embedded in such networks and fields, not to mention bureaucratic organizations (see, for an example, Wenzel, Will &

Sigmund, 2009), the more likely it is that path dependencies that arise on the project level will spread to the network and field level – and vice versa, if, for instance, field practices are highly institutionalized. It is the very recursive interplay between the processes of these different levels of analysis that requires more conceptual and empirical attention than is possible in this short paper. This is also true with respect to cognitive or behavioral inertia or lock-in on the level of individuals (Huff & Huff, 2000), which have not been taken into account either in this paper or in any of our empirical studies.

Relations and routines are by no means the only sources of persistencies and path dependencies, but co-evolve – and cause these very outcomes – together with specializations, resource interdependencies, shared views and norms, institutional legacies and relation-specific investments and the threat of sunk cost. Future studies should pay more theoretical consideration and empirical awareness also to these complementary phenomena. This is also true with regard to the ‘environment’ that if competitive and dynamic challenge the persistencies and path dependencies or, as in the case of some murky political environments (Pierson, 2000), support them.

Future empirical studies – in the film and television industry but also in other fields characterized by project-based organizing – require more methodological care in order to detect the exact working of one or more self-reinforcing processes before asserting that a project’s strategic persistencies or structural inertia are found, a project organization, a project network or a project ecology should be considered organizational path dependencies. The same is true with respect to the exact demonstration of how the recursive feedback loops operate between different levels of analysis.

Despite the need for additional theoretical reflection and empirical studies that demonstrate more methodological care, one major implication for managerial practices may already be stated: Managers, including managers of projects and project networks, should be more aware of persistencies and even path dependencies that may arise from project-based organizing. In particular, they should be more receptive about possible self-reinforcing mechanisms at work and understand how projects, as temporary systems, are tied to organizations, networks, and fields that are as likely to be potential sources of such persistencies and path dependencies as routines and relations within a particular project.

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