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Emergence and Spread of 'Unconferences' as a New Temporary Organizational Form

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Abstract

Extant research mostly looks at the process of how temporary organizations proliferate within a single organization field. This study examines temporary organizations that emerge in one organizational field and are then introduced into other organizational fields. We argue that when this occurs, organizers must contend with the illegitimacy threat posed by temporary organizational forms that have long been institutionalized in the other fields. Organizers must decide whether they should accept the threat and retain the original form of the temporary organization, or whether they should modify the new temporary organizational form in order to make it more acceptable to audiences in other organizational fields. We argue that organizers will use legitimacy claims from the organizational field in which the temporary organization first emerged to mitigate the threat of illegitimacy. We further argue that the effectiveness of this strategy will depend on similarity in norms and beliefs between these fields: The more similar the organizational fields the more persuasive are the legitimacy claims, and the easier it is for the organizers to retain the form as it was first created; the more dissimilar are the organizational fields when it comes to norms and beliefs the harder it is for organizers to persuasively use these legitimacy claims, and the more organizers will have to modify the temporary organizational form to take account of audience expectations. We examine this using the case of the so called "unconferences": an alternative conference form that emerged within the software development community at the start of the millennium in conjunction with the Web 2.0 movement. Our data comprises of 228 distinct unconferences between 2004 – when the unconference was first launched, and 2015. We examine the influence of organizational field dissimilarity of unconferences from the original field where it was first held, on the extent to which the pure unconference format is retained. We show that as adopters of the new form move away from the original organizational field, they are more likely to modify the original unconference form.

Keywords: New temporary forms of organizing, legitimacy claims, unconferences, diffusion of new temporary organizational forms

Introduction

Research on temporary organizations is greatly indebted to scholars who were first intrigued by the empirical properties of projects, film crews, or theatre groups – systems set up to "pursue ex ante agreed-upon task objectives within a predetermined time frame" (Bakker, 2010; Bakker, DeFillippi, Schwab & Sydow, 2016: 1704). Bakker et al. (2016) note that time is the central attribute of interest in this research, but they also point out that it is conceptualized differently, depending on whether we look at time within temporary organizations or time across temporary organizations. Studying time within temporary organizations has led researchers to focus on the tempo, acceleration and deceleration, and rhythm of temporary organizing. On the other hand, studying time across temporary organizations has mostly considered change as temporary organizations proliferate.

In this context, an issue of considerable interest is the extent to which temporary organizations that come later in time, remain similar to the founding temporary organizational form. Take for example, the modern Dragon Boat race events which were first started in Hong Kong in 1976 (Sofield & Sivan, 2003). The dragon boats that were constructed for the first event were built of teak, with dragon heads and tails of camphor wood in accordance with traditional Chinese boat construction principles. Also, in accordance with ancient Chinese traditions, Taoist prayers were used at the start of the race to bring the boats to 'life', and after the race prayers were made to retire them to 'rest'. In the years that followed the first event, the Dragon Boat race spread to other countries such as Canada (starting in 1986), New Zealand (starting in 1986), Indonesia (starting in 1988), the United States (starting in 1989), and Sweden (starting in 1992). As Dragon Boat races were mounted in these countries, the Taoist traditions associated with the Dragon Boat Race in Hong Kong were abandoned, and the event was reinterpreted as a water sports event (Sofield & Sivan, 2003).

The change that Dragon Boat races undergo as they proliferate across the globe is an example of how temporary organizations change their form within the same organizational field. Similarly, to understand how temporary organizational forms emerge and grow in an organizational field, researchers have studied Australasian wine shows (Beverland, Hoffman, & Rasmussen, 2001), film and music festivals (de Valeck, 2006; Leenders, Van Telgen, Gemser, & Van der Wurff, 2005; Leenders, Go & Bhansing, 2015), and Olympic games (Goldblatt, 2016). This stream of research looks at the process of how temporary organizations proliferate within a particular organizational field, and how changing

circumstances in the new locations, such as changing audiences, and changing demands from stakeholders lead organizers to change the form of the temporary organizations (Leenders et al., 2015). While these studies help us understand how temporary organizations change as they proliferate geographically, this research primarily focuses on single organizational fields. In contrast, we do not have studies that look at what happens when temporary organizations that are created in one organizational field spread to other organizational fields (Bakker et al., 2016).

A challenge that temporary organizational forms confront when they are adopted in organizational fields that are different from the organizational field in which they first emerged, is that of legitimacy. Different organizational field have different legitimacy requirements (Deephouse, & Suchman, 2008). Temporary organizations that start in one organizational field and then spread to other organizational fields must contend with the difference between the legitimacy used to attract audiences in the previous organizational field, and the legitimacy that temporary organizations in other organizational forms use to recruit audiences in other organizational fields. When a new temporary organization that appeared first in one organizational field enters a new organizational field, it must contend with the legitimacy of temporary forms that have been institutionalized as a "taken-for-granted" template over the years (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006: 28). Organizers in this organizational field that wish to launch a temporary organizational from another field confront a legitimacy problem when it comes to deciding whether they should retain the form of the temporary organization from the organizational field in which it first emerged. If they fully retain the form, they confront an illegitimacy threat that may lead audiences whose expectations are shaped by the taken-for-granted template of the forms they are accustomed to reject it (Zuckerman (1999: 1399)). The dilemma facing organizers is whether they should take this risk, or should they modify the temporary organizational form to make more acceptable to these audiences? Furthermore, if organizers decide to modify the form, they must also consider how far should they depart from the form?

In this paper we argue that organizers will use legitimacy claims from the organizational field in which the temporary organization first occurred to mitigate the threat of illegitimacy posed by audience expectations in other organizational fields. However, we also argue that the effectiveness of this strategy will depend on similarity in norms and beliefs between these fields: The more similar are the organizational fields the more persuasive are the legitimacy claims, and the easier it is for the organizers to retain the form as it was first created. Whereas the more dissimilar are the organizational fields when it comes to norms and beliefs

the harder it is for organizers to persuasively use these legitimacy claims, and the more organizers will have to modify the temporary organizational form to take account of audience expectations. We examine both how legitimacy claims are framed when a temporary organizational form is first created, and how the dissimilarity of organizational fields influences modification of this form. We do this by looking at unconferences: participant driven meetings that reject the traditional conference format. The unconference was pioneered in the software development community and gained wider attention in the high-tech environment of Silicon Valley where it was widely publicized by Tim O'Reilly, as part of the "Web 2.0" movement. It was then picked up by organizers in other organizational fields (Moriaty, 2017). Organizers in these organizational fields had to manage the tension that audiences experienced between the unconference – a new format that relied on association with the Silicon Valley innovation and dynamism – and the established conference format that audiences were accustomed to. In this paper we argue that organizers manage this tension in two ways: First, they use the prestige of Silicon Valley and the publicity of Web 2.0 movement to legitimize unconferences to audiences who may harbour doubts about this radical alternative. Second, organizers that cater to audiences in organizational fields that are markedly dissimilar from Silicon Valley create hybrids of the unconference and conference format. They thereby retain the appeal associated with the unconference while making this format more acceptable to audiences who are accustomed to the "taken-for-granted" template of their organizational field.

Our paper is structured as follows. In the first part of the paper we briefly review the literature on new organizational forms (Hsu & Hannan, 2005). We focus particular attention on sources of legitimation of new organizational forms (Bakker, DeFillippi, Schwab, & Sydow, 2016), where legitimation provides the basis for wide-spread adoption of this form diffusion (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Using this theoretical background, we argue that in a mature organizational field, legitimation of new temporary organization forms must deal with the tension between the new temporary organizational form and the expectations of audiences that are accustomed to the institutionalized temporary organizational form.

In the next part of the paper we explore how this tension shapes the spread of unconferences beyond Silicon Valley organizational field, to other fields. The emergence of unconferences in Silicon Valley was a product of the unique environment of this organizational field. However, to understand the strength of the legitimacy claims made by organizers of unconferences in other organizational fields it is very useful to start with the historical background to the emergence of unconferences as new temporary organizational

form, paying particular attention to the Web 2.0 movement as key to the legitimation of the new form. Following this, we analyse the legitimacy claims that provide organizers in other fields with novelty rhetoric they can use to attract audiences who are accustomed to different temporary organizational forms. We follow this with an overview and analysis of the growth and diffusion of unconferences. We detail our data on 228 distinct unconferences in North America that took place between 2004 and 2015; operationalizing various characteristics of these unconferences. Using these data, we analyse changes in the unconference form as the unconference is adopted in organizational fields that are increasingly dissimilar from Silicon Valley – the field in which the unconference first emerged. Analyzing our data we also find that changes in unconference form are also accompanied in some instances by changes in legitimation rhetoric. We discuss these changes as moves by organizers to modify the rhetoric so as to make the legitimacy claims more consistent with other organizational fields. We conclude the paper with a discussion of research on the emergence and spread of new temporary organizational forms. We suggest that this can be an important area of research that allows researchers to contextualize more broadly the structure and dynamics of temporary organizations.

Theoretical Overview

In their study of new event forms in the German popular music industry Schüßler, Dobush, Wessel (2014: 418) note that organizers are caught between the need to attract audiences and the resources needed to successfully make this happen (see also Leenders et al., 2015). Deephouse and Suchman (2008: 54) make a further distinction between "internal and external audiences who observe organizations and make legitimacy assessments". Both temporary and permanent organizations are subject to assessment by internal and external audiences. However, the limited duration of temporary organizations changes the role of audience legitimation. As open-ended entities without a fixed life-span, permanent organizations can engage with audiences on a continuous basis. Permanent organizations allow for negotiations and agreements between organizers and audiences that can evolve over time. It also allows organizers to experiment with different legitimacy strategies and combine legitimacy strategies as they grow. Temporary organizations lack this flexibility. They must acquire positive legitimacy assessment as early as possible if they are to attract resources from internal audiences that are needed to set up the new temporary organization – as well as mobilize positive legitimacy assessment from external audiences, specifically customers and participants. There is little scope for negotiations between organizers and

audiences. Organizers offer the temporary organization to audiences more or less readymade, and audiences can choose to accept or reject the temporary organization on these terms.

Organizational form is an important part of gaining audience legitimation. In their study of how film festivals are organized, Rüling and Pedersen (2010: 321) note that festival format is central to creating and managing the identity of the festival as a temporary organization. In a mature field such as film festivals, formats become standardized and gain greater legitimacy as they "converge isomorphically around increasingly taken-for-granted templates" (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006: 28). A new temporary organizational form that promotes an alternative to the taken-for-granted template must therefore contend with the threat of illegitimacy that comes from changing a template that is already institutionalized in a mature organizational field. This threat, as Zuckerman (1999: 1399) points out emerges when: "Organizations that do not meet institutionalized expectations for how they should look and act are viewed as illegitimate". It is the threat of illegitimacy, maintains Zuckerman (1999:1399), that "induces organizations to adopt accepted procedures". Breaking with accepted procedures can lead to negative reaction from audiences, and thus prove to be costly. To reduce the potential costs of illegitimacy, organizers turn to sources of legitimation that will not only allay audience's doubts about the new temporary organizational form, but potentially also generate enthusiasm.

Paradoxically, an effective source of legitimation available to organizers of new temporary organizational forms is to gain legitimacy by contrasting the novelty of the new form with the institutionalized taken-for-granted form (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Novelty, which is a disadvantage if organizers see it purely as a threat to legitimacy, becomes an advantage once it is used to highlight benefits that the taken-for-granted format does not offer. However, employing this strategy depends on using rhetoric that resonates strongly with audiences – rhetoric that justifies why the new temporary organizational form is worth considering in spite of challenging what audiences take for granted (Tilly, 2006).

An effective legitimizing rhetoric is usually field specific (Riaz, Buchanan, Ruebottom, 2016). It relies on the values and norms that audiences in a particular field see as salient. It therefore follows that rhetoric of novelty is more likely to be effective in organizational fields where audiences are more likely to legitimize novelty positively rather than negatively. And by the same token, the strength of novelty rhetoric declines in terms of persuasive power in fields where novelty is not as positively evaluated by audiences.

As novelty losses its persuasive power, organizers have to contend with increasing tension between the legitimacy of the taken-for-granted format and the diminishing effectiveness of their claims for the new temporary organizational forms. One way to manage this tension is to modify the format of the new temporary organizational form (Minkoff, 1994). This can involve reducing the novelty of the new temporary organizational form while retaining the legitimacy claim associated with novelty. The legitimacy claim of a new temporary organizational form will in most cases derive its rhetoric from the organizational field in which it first emerged. Organizers in other fields are inclined to emulate the legitimacy claims from the original field. But as we shall see in the next part of the paper, the further they operate from the original organizational field, the less they can count on this rhetoric to counter the illegitimacy threat, and the more likely they are to modify the new temporary organizational form – as well as perhaps modify the rhetoric.

Unconferences and the Web 2.0 movement

Conferences: temporary organizations where people travel to another location to make and attend presentations, exchange views, and share information, first emerged towards the end of the 19th century, and thereafter increased exponentially in number and variety during the 20th (Smith, 1990). The explosion in the number of conferences, made possible by affordable travel and accommodation, has led to the development of an industry staffed by conference professionals, and the emergence of a standard organizing form. The International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) monitors conferences that are repeated annually and have a minimum of 50 people; it records 5010 conferences globally for the year 2005. If one includes conferences that occur on a one-time basis, or infrequently, the number is much greater.

Rüling (2011: 201) notes that institutionalization of events such as film festivals, book fairs, or academic conferences, occurs "both through a process of gradual evolution over time as interaction patterns are repeated and shared understandings reinforced". This observation applies to the institutionalization of the standard conference form. The large number of conferences held each year over many decades have created shared understanding of how conferences should be organized. These shared understandings are disseminated and reinforced by professional and trade associations that deal specifically with all aspects of conference organizing. Rogers (2003) lists 11 international, European and British professional and trade associations that perform the institutional work needed to maintain

conference organizing as a field of practice (Hardy and Maguir, 2010; Zilber, 2011). Rogers (2003: 142) also provides a summary of the basic principles of the standard conference form: "The organization of a conference requires a similar strategic approach to that needed for planning and managing the most other events. Clear objectives should be set from the beginning, a budget has to be established, a venue must be sourced and delegates' accommodation and travel arrangements made, a program has to be prepared and the conference managed for its duration." The emergence of conference organizing as a field, and its subsequent maturation, has not only institutionalized the practices associated with the standard form, it also created a taken-for-granted legitimacy in the eyes of conference participants. Over time, audiences therefore increasingly confer legitimacy on conferences that are advertised and held in conformity with the established conference template.

Unconferences – participant driven meetings that reject traditional conference invert the logic of conference as a temporary organization. While the conference is organized and controlled by a small group charged with preparing a formal program in advance of the meeting, the unconference is deliberately decentralized, with participants driving the program development from the start. The unconference does not have predetermined topics, sessions, or keynote addresses delivered by distinguished speakers. The guiding philosophy of the unconference is based on creating conditions for social interaction and knowledge sharing rather than programmatically structuring these activities. Unconference organizers select the location, make the arrangements, and take care of the logistics. Participants meet at the start of the unconference to develop the topics that will form the program. Any participant who wishes to propose a topic may do so in a brief pitch. The pitch is posted on a bulletin board with a place and time of a breakout for discussion. The discussion is informal and freewheeling; everybody can join - there are no rules regarding the amount of time that each speaker is allowed to speak.

The unconference is consciously designed in opposition to the traditional conference form, or what Wolf and Troxler (2008) call, the "normal conference". Wolf and Troxler (2008) argue that the guiding philosophy of the normal conference reflects the efficient production of standardized goods, including information and knowledge, which was an inseparable aspect of the large and centrally managed bureaucracies that characterized business at that time. Dissatisfaction with these bureaucracies spilled over to increasing resistance to the bureaucratic "normal conference". And this resistance led to experiments with formats that take a radically different approach to conference organizing. Robert Jungk launched the "Future Workshop" format in the 1960s with the aim of bringing people together to search

for solutions to social problems (Jungk & Müllert, 1987). In the mid-1980s Harrison Owen observed that people liked the coffee breaks in a "normal conference" better than the formal presentations and plenary sessions. He created "Open Space" conferences which have no keynote speakers, no pre-announced schedules, and no panel discussions (Owen, 2008). Instead, the participants meet at the start of the conference and jointly decide how to organize the conference.

These proposed alternatives to the traditional conference remained isolated experiments. They failed to make headways in a field where the institutionalized conference form is deeply entrenched. It was not until late 1990s that the unconference found an audience willing to embrace the new temporary organization format in the relatively new and rapidly growing software developers' community. The first mention of the term "unconference" that we were able to find is in a 1998 listserve announcement for a two-day XML, XSL, and XLL developers conference in Montreal, Canada. The term "unconference" next appears in conjunction with the 2004 "BloggerCon", a user focused conference for the blogger community. Dave Winer, the key organizer of the event wanted to break with the traditional conference format. As he put it later:

> "The idea for an unconference came while sitting in the audience of a panel discussion at a conference, waiting for someone to say something intelligent, or not self-serving, or not mind-numbingly boring. The idea came while listening to someone drone endlessly through PowerPoint slides, nodding off, or (in later years) checking email, or posting something to my blog, wondering if it had to be so mind-numbingly boring."

Winner matched the label "unconference" with the new conference template that he believed was better suited to the world of developers, hackers, and bloggers in which he worked. However, although he championed the unconference and matched it with a catchy label, the credit for the diffusion of the unconference format belongs to Tim O'Reilly and the "Web 2.0" movement which he launched in 2004.

Tim O'Reilly is often referred to as the "Oracle of Silicon Valley" (Chafkin, 2010). Tim O'Reilly's unique status in Silicon Valley is based on his role as a publisher, rather than as a technological entrepreneur. He has become one of the foremost interpreters of technological trends, not only in Silicon Valley, but to the wider public as well. In a field that is intensely preoccupied with the future, O'Reilly derived his standing in Silicon Valley in large part from the widespread perception that he is able see the future more clearly than others. The credibility of his predictions is also due to the belief that he is not beholden to any company,

and that he fights for the future of technology and innovation, even if this pits him against powerful players in the industry. O'Reilly's reinforces his prestige by actively trying to shape the vocabulary that frames technological development. He has repeatedly coined terms for complex technologies that have gained wide circulation. He rebranded "free software" as "open source software", promoted the term "web 2.0", and more recently has been propagating the idea of "Government as platform", or "Gov2.0"

The "Web 2.0" movement was launched in 2004 by Tim O'Reilly in a conference appropriately titled "Web 2.0". At the heart of the Web 2.0 movement is the concept of "collective intelligence", the idea that the connectivity and interactivity of the web radically decentralize the creation of knowledge. By allowing individuals to directly connect and interact, the web bypasses traditional hierarchies, allowing individuals to swap ideas and collaborate on projects freely without the constraints of traditional hierarchies. For Web 2.0 adherents the web's potential for self-organized collaboration unleashes innovation and accelerates change, well beyond what is normally possible in traditional institutional or corporate hierarchies.

Although the manifesto that accompanied the Web 2.0 conference emphasized decentralized users sharing, as the driving force in the evolution of the web, the organization of the conference conformed to the traditional format of keynote speakers, and the usual networking of specially invited attendees. The unconference format found its expression in a related development that occurred a year earlier when Tim O'Reilly invited a select group to what his public relations director, Sara Winge, facetiously called "Foo Camp", for "Friends of O'Reilly Camp".

Foo Camp started as a "Foo Bar", an open bar that Sara Winge organized for friends of O'Reilly at one of his conferences. This evolved into Foo Camp, an event held for the first time in 2003 in O'Reilly Media facilities in Sebastopole, California. Foo Camp combined the informal socializing at an open bar with the philosophy of 'collective intelligence' that O'Reilly espoused in his Web 2.0 manifesto: There is little advanced preparation beyond providing food, showers, and meeting space (Battelle, 2004). The attendees collaboratively decide on the agenda after arrival. The agenda is posted on a whiteboard, allowing for changes as the event proceeds.

Tim O'Reilly has called "Foo Camps", the "wiki of conferences" (Levy, 2006). The comparison captures the user generated aspect of the event, but it is not entirely accurate. Whereas wikis are open to all contributors, Foo Camps are by invitation only - and the invitations are usually extended to people that O'Reilly believes have the most to contribute.

When Tantek Çelik a participant in the 2005 Foo Camp was not invited back, he decided to organize 'BarCamp', a rival event that is modelled on Foo Camp, but is open to all (Single, 2005). The BarCamp format was subsequently picked up by other organizers.

Both Foo camps and BarCamps have proliferated since their initial launch in 2003 and 2005 respectively. O'Reilly has continued to organize Foo camps, but they remain under the tight control of O'Reilly media, and hence exercise influence by virtue of the high visibility of Tim O'Reilly. The organizers of BarCamps, on the other hand, have shown greater willingness to share their ideas and experience with others who expressed interest in adopting the format. These organizers used the term "BarCamp", or sometimes only the "Bar" prefix, in events that were based on the unconference format. The unconference label eventually gained ascendancy over 'Foo camp' and 'BarCamp'. Although today one can find events using these labels – mostly in the software and hackers communities – they have been eclipsed by the unconference label.

New temporary organizational forms can derive legitimacy by embracing ideologies that propose transformational organizational and/or societal change. The unconference as a new temporary organizational form was strongly legitimized by the so called "Web 2.0" movement. Web 2.0 celebrated overturning traditional hierarchies of expertise. It encouraged bottom-up organizing in opposition to top-down structures. The unconference embodied this ideology, and therefore unconference organizers resorted to appropriating the language of Web 2.0, and the myths surrounding Silicon Valley and high tech.

The Web 2.0 movement came to prominence beyond high-tech when in December 2006, Time magazine selected "You" as its Person of the Year. The magazine cover showed a computer with "You." on the screen. Paradoxically, as Time explained, the "You" on its cover did not celebrate individualism, but community spirit - online community spirit to be more precise. Time Person of the Year honoured all the individuals who contributed to Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, and other online communities. In the accompanying editorial Time acknowledged the World Wide Web as having made all this possible, but gave most of the credit to the "new web". "Silicon Valley consultants", the article stated, "call it Web 2.0, as if it were a new version of some old software. But it's really a revolution."

Analysis of unconference growth and diffusion

Web 2.0 came out of Silicon Valley at a time when the United States, and the rest of the world, was fascinated with the technologies and companies that were emerging from Northern California. The cluster of industries that were being built on the World Wide Web

became “celebrity industries” (Lampel & Germain. 2016). For many watching from afar, the organizational practices of Silicon Valley encouraged the creativity and innovation – that they wished to emulate. The unconference format was one of these practices, and not surprisingly it attracted attention, and imitators well beyond Silicon Valley.

Therefore, in this analysis we are focused on the emergence and use of the ‘unconference’ label and the format under that label. First, we set our study period. As described in the above history of the emergence of unconference as a label and template, it began to attract imitators in 2004[1]. To confirm the historical account, we scanned publications and online announcements for unconferences going back to the year 2000. We found the use of the label started in 2004. Second, we decided to restrict our geographic boundary to North America only. This is to ensure consistency of language and cultures. However, as we are interested in diffusion, we did not have any restrictions on organizational fields or sectors. Finally, we then collected further information on all meetings and gatherings in North America that were announced as “unconferences” from 2004 to 2015. Our data comprises of 228 distinct unconferences and figure 1 shows the distribution over this study period by year.

Insert figure 1 here

We collected the following information about each unconference from archival records about the events: (i) Date of the event (ii) Primary industry focus: unconferences started in the software developers’ community, but it then spread to other sectors that make up different organizational fields. This variable captures the primary target industry at the unconference (iii) duration of the unconference in number of days (iv) duration of the entire event in number of days (v) a categorical variable (0/1) that takes the value “1” if the unconference is hosted or sponsored by a corporate entity (vi) city, location where the event was organised (vii) text description of the agenda, promotional material, and format of the conference.

We have argued how the Web 2.0 movement celebrated overturning traditional hierarchies of expertise that is espoused by traditional conferring formats. In contracts, it encouraged bottom-up organizing. The unconference format embodied this ideology, and

[1] Google trend analysis also indicates the emergence of the term ‘unconferences’ in 2004 (See appendix). The peak use of the term was in May 2009.

therefore draws heavily from the language of Web 2.0, and the myths surrounding Silicon Valley and high tech. Therefore, we would expect that the format would be more readily adopted in organizational fields that are more similar to high tech. To test this proposition, we coded a variable: Organizational field dissimilarity to software development organizational field as follows.

Organizational field dissimilarity: Using data on the target industry, we code organizational field dissimilarity on a five-point ordinal scale to indicate the dissimilarity from the original field i.e. software development, where "1" indicates the original fields and "5" indicates the greatest dissimilarity from the original field. Our coding is as follows: "1" indicates Software, Web-based technologies; "2" indicates various types of product development, mobile technologies, digital media, gaming; "3" indicates libraries, healthcare, financial services, entrepreneurship; "4" indicates social development, education, manufacturing, law; "5" indicates hospitality, town planning, real estate, civic administration, politics. The coding of each unconference's field dissimilarity on the scale of 1 to 5 was done by three researchers together after reading and discussing the description of the unconference event.

Figure 2 shows the spread of unconferences to different organizational field audiences – indicating the popularity of the format in fields that are increasingly dissimilar from software development where it first emerged. In figure 2, the average organizational field dissimilarity is the average dissimilarity for all unconferences for that year. We find that the average dissimilarity score for each year has steadily increased and appears to have flattened between 3 and 4 since 2010.

Insert figure 2 here

We observe that most of the early adopters were in fields that were related to, or influenced by, the software industry. These industries are more connected economically, socially and culturally to the industry where the unconference first emerged, and are therefore likely to be more receptive to the unconference. In contrast, the spread of unconferences to industries and organizational fields that are more dissimilar compared to fhigh-tech is more gradual. The take-off in the industries that are more dissimilar from the first introduction of unconferences is dramatic after 2006, but it levels off subsequently. One explanation is that the ideology that strongly resonate with audiences in industries such as mobile technologies, digital media, and gaming, may have less influence on audiences in law, town planning, or real estate that are far removed from Silicon Valley realities. For this reason, as we can see in

Figure 2, the composition of industries that hold unconferences in North America as time passes continues to favour industries that are more similar to software development.

Analysis of unconference template change

Mobilizing novelty as a legitimation claim helps organizers of new temporary organizations deal with the threat of illegitimacy. When the legitimacy claims of the new temporary organizational form are based on the norms and beliefs of the organizational field in which it was created – as is the case for unconferences which emerged from Silicon Valley – organizers can effectively employ novelty rhetoric to counter the threat of illegitimacy. However, when they seek to adopt the new temporary organizational forms in organizational fields that are dissimilar in terms of norms and beliefs from the field in which the new form emerged novelty claims carry less weight compared to the legitimacy of the taken-for-granted conference form. In these more dissimilar organizational fields organizers deal with resulting tensions by combining features of the established and new forms – relying on the legitimacy that audiences confer on established form while benefiting from the legitimacy claims of the new form. To test this proposition that the format of organizing would increasingly be a hybrid format as it spreads across fields over to time – we create a variable to capture the dissimilarity of the format from the original unconference format.

Format dissimilarity: Using the data from duration of the unconference and the rest of the event as well as the text data about the agenda and description, we code format dissimilarity on a five-point ordinal scale to indicate the dissimilarity from the original format i.e. full-time, by invitation only, and completely unstructured, where "1" indicates close proximity to the original format while "5" indicates the greatest dissimilarity from the original format. Our coding for format dissimilarity is as follows: "1" indicates full time and unstructured i.e. the entire conference is in an unconference format and there is no pre-set agenda; "2" indicates at least half the event time is in an unconference format with some structured content like keynotes or pre-set tracks with pre-announced topics; "3" indicates a conference where significant time is allocated for an unconference (e.g. full- or half-day) typically at the beginning or end of the main conference but the rest of the conference had more than two additional days is in a conventional conference format; "4" indicates a conference where multiple parallel tracks called 'unconferences' are organised with pre-set topics as part of the overall planned conference and "5 indicates a format where only limited time is allocated to a

session titled as an unconference and it is structured i.e. typically only one unconference session (e.g. 2 hours) with a pre-set topic as part of a much larger conference with planned content. The format dissimilarity was coded by three researchers together after reading and discussing the detailed format of each unconference.

Figure 3 shows the changes in the format of unconferences – indicating that a significant number of unconferences have been similar to the original format. The average format score: the average format score of all unconferences in a year, takes an inverted "U" relationship over time indicating the possibility that the organisers were increasingly experimenting with the format before finding a more stable format.

To understand the relationship of format and organizational field by year, we plot the data on a three-dimensional plot. Figure 4 shows the distribution of unconferences by organizational field dissimilarity, format dissimilarity, and year in a 3-D plot. The values of the plot represent the average values. From this plot we find that towards the end of our study period, organizational field dissimilarity steadily increased but format dissimilarity peaks around the value of 3 format dissimilarity. This indicates some modification of the format as unconferences are adopted by other fields over time. Furthermore, during the early part of the study period organizational field dissimilarity was low. This lends support to our proposition that as adopters launched unconferences in fields that were increasingly dissimilar from the original field, which is likely to happen over time, they are also likely to modify the unconference form.

Insert figure 3 and 4 here

While the unconference originally emerged as a stand-alone event and gained legitimacy in Silicon Valley by standing in clear contrast to the institutionalized conference form – as the unconference moved beyond Silicon Valley organizers often sought to allay audiences' concern that unconferences are risky in terms of time and money by creating unconference-conference hybrids. As Figure 3 shows, whereas most of the early unconferences kept to the pure format of full time and completely unstructured meetings, there is a drift towards modifying the pure unconference form, by holding the event in combination with a regular conference, or by creating a program with pre-set topics prior to the meeting. But as Figure 4 shows, experimentation with unconference hybrids seems to reach a peak, and then settle at a hybrid that combines a traditional conference format and an unconference in a structure that

gives due importance to both, with keynote speakers and some preannounced topics. This suggests that organisers are not likely to make 'extreme' modifications to the template as they transfer the format to dissimilar organizational fields – instead, they may be looking for an optimum variation of the template that balances the legitimacy of unconference as originally formed, and the institutionalized expectations of audiences in new organizational fields.

Further Evidence of Evolution of Unconference Legitimation

Thus far we have looked at how organizers modify the template as a way of navigating the tension between the legitimacy of established conference form and the legitimacy claims of the unconference. It is also interesting to investigate how the organizer's pragmatic move to modify the unconference in response to the pressure of institutionalized expectations of the established form is accompanied by change in legitimation claim for the unconference. In other words, how do organizers of unconferences retain the legitimation rhetoric associated with the pure unconference template when they organize unconferences in new organizational fields, or is there a shift in the rhetoric as unconferences are introduced into fields that are not shaped by the beliefs and values of Silicon Valley.

To address this question, we searched for archival data about the marketing and communication of unconferences in our database. We could not find data on every unconference in our database, but what we find, as expected from the history of the unconference as a temporary organizational form, is that in the early days the unconference form was positioned to audiences as an 'anti-conference'. The marketing material in the early years had a clear message: the unconference is not about structure and efficiency – but it is 'anarchy' by design; set up by the community to enable debate and discussion of topics that genuinely matter to the community. Tim O'Reilly captured this rhetoric succinctly when in 2005 he described the unconference format as: "…democratic, at times anarchic and everything your standard conference is not".

With the passage of time, we find that as corporate organisers adopted the unconference to new organizational fields there are more marketing information that shows greater emphasis on goal legitimation; trying to address the concern of participants that the unconference will not deliver benefits they had come to expect from conference attendance. The rhetoric in later years therefore shifts to assuring participants that the unconference is not completely anarchic. The message to participants often highlights the presence of structure – especially around topics that were of interest to the corporate sponsor or organiser. As noted earlier, to

further assure participants that the unconference is not risky in terms of time and money, organizers also hold the event under the umbrella of a larger conference. This also produces changes in the rhetoric of legitimation. For instance, in 2006 eBay organized a three-day conference, but reserved the final day for an unconference, introduced to participants as follows: "Taking a cue from the cooperative philosophy behind eBay's open APIs and mashups, eBay will invite the 800 conference participants to lead their own sessions and design informal discussion forums".

Anticipating, and experiencing, the pressure of audiences' institutionalized pressures the marketing announcements that we find by organizers also moved away from the openness that was commonly associated with the unconference. Towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, organizers displayed less willingness to keep unconferences open to whomsoever wishes to participate. Organisers became increasingly focused on quality over quantity of participants – often using targeted invitations and assignment of specific roles to experts, or pre-event preparatory work such as the submission of an introductory statement, to select audiences. This also produced a shift in legitimacy rhetoric. As the Web 2.0 movement fades into memory, the strength of the legitimacy claims amplified by this movement's weakens. Increasingly, we find evidence to suggest that the rhetoric around unconferences steadily moved from championing democratic anarchy to creating an exciting and valuable experience. More recently, we find that the focus of organisers is shifting from the process to the outcome of unconferences. In effect, we see here the introduction of goal legitimation. Organizers are therefore more likely to highlight what participants can expect in such events. As Joshua Kauffman, entrepreneur and unconference facilitator notes in 2014 "… the unstructured, high-energy environment of the unconference amplifies ideas" and sees his role as someone who can efficiently sort through "…dozens of pitches, help attendees refine their ideas, and boil them down to concise and useful topics for discussion" (Bagley, 2014).

Conclusion

The organizing of economic and social activities in the 20th century has been described, for good or ill, as taking place in what Perrow (1991) called the "Society of Organizations". The 20th century has seen the rise to prominence of new organizational forms such as the multidivisional firm, the shopping centre, and the fast food restaurant. Research on the diffusion of organizational forms has focused its attention on these, and other similar, organizational forms. With the exception of research on project management, which has

grown into a field of its own, much less attention has been paid to how new forms of temporary organizations emerge and spread. The increasing prevalence of temporary organizing in the 21st century is giving rise to new types of temporary organizations, and with it, more research on this topic (Bennis & Slater, 1968; Packendorff, 2002; Pomodoro, 2013).

In this paper we examine how new temporary organizational forms deal with the problem of legitimation when their external audiences are conditioned by strongly institutionalized temporary organizations. We argue that organizers have to deal with the tensions that arise between the legitimacy of established temporary organizations and the threat of illegitimacy associated with temporary organizations that represent a radical alternative. We further argue that organizers generate legitimacy for the new temporary organizational form by contrasting the novelty of the new form against the taken-for-granted form. However, novelty as a legitimating claim decreases in force in organizational fields that are geographically and professionally distant from the fields in which the new temporary organizational form first emerged. To adjust for the increasing imbalance between the legitimation of taken-for-granted forms and the new form, organizers often modify the original new organizational template, thereby making it more acceptable to new audiences.

We test these ideas using the unconference – an alternative conference form that emerged first in Silicon Valley, and then acquired high visibility as part of the Web2.0 movement. Our data support our key argument. However, since empirically we focus on one form of temporary organizing, it is clear that further research is needed. Promising areas of research, that parallel our data, are new forms of temporary organizing that have relatively clear points of origin, and patterns of diffusion that can be tracked. This is not uncommon in technological change: new technologies that give rise to new forms of temporary organizing often emerge in a given location and/or industry, and then are reproduced elsewhere. This still leaves new temporary organizational forms that do not have clear historical pattern of diffusion. Research on these new temporary organizational forms may be more challenging, but it should yield important insights nevertheless.

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Figure 1: Number of unconferences in North America (2004 – 2015)

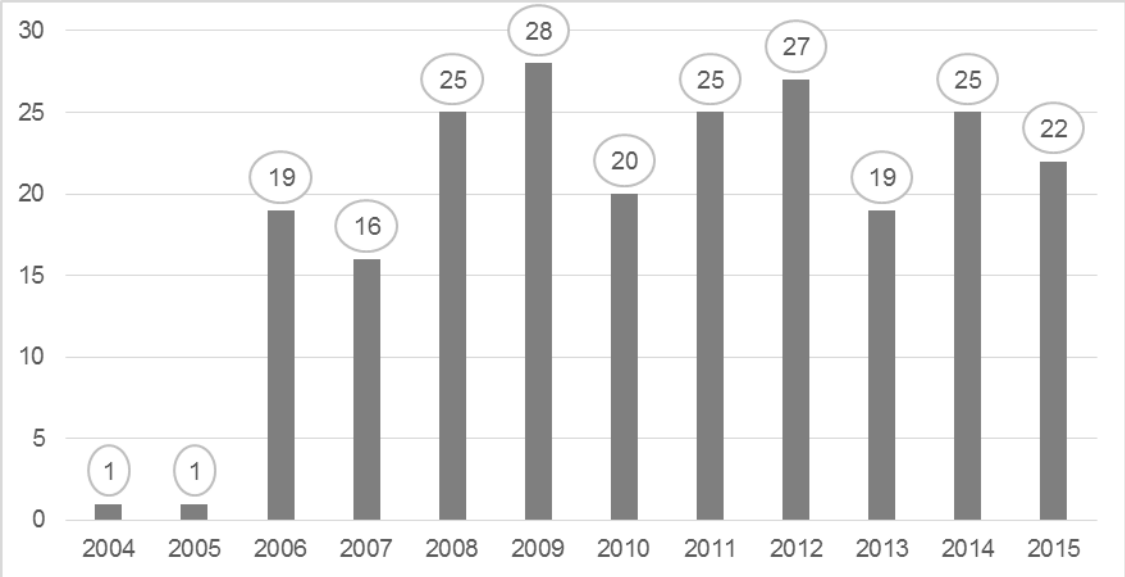


Figure 2: Spread of unconferences to dissimilar organizational fields

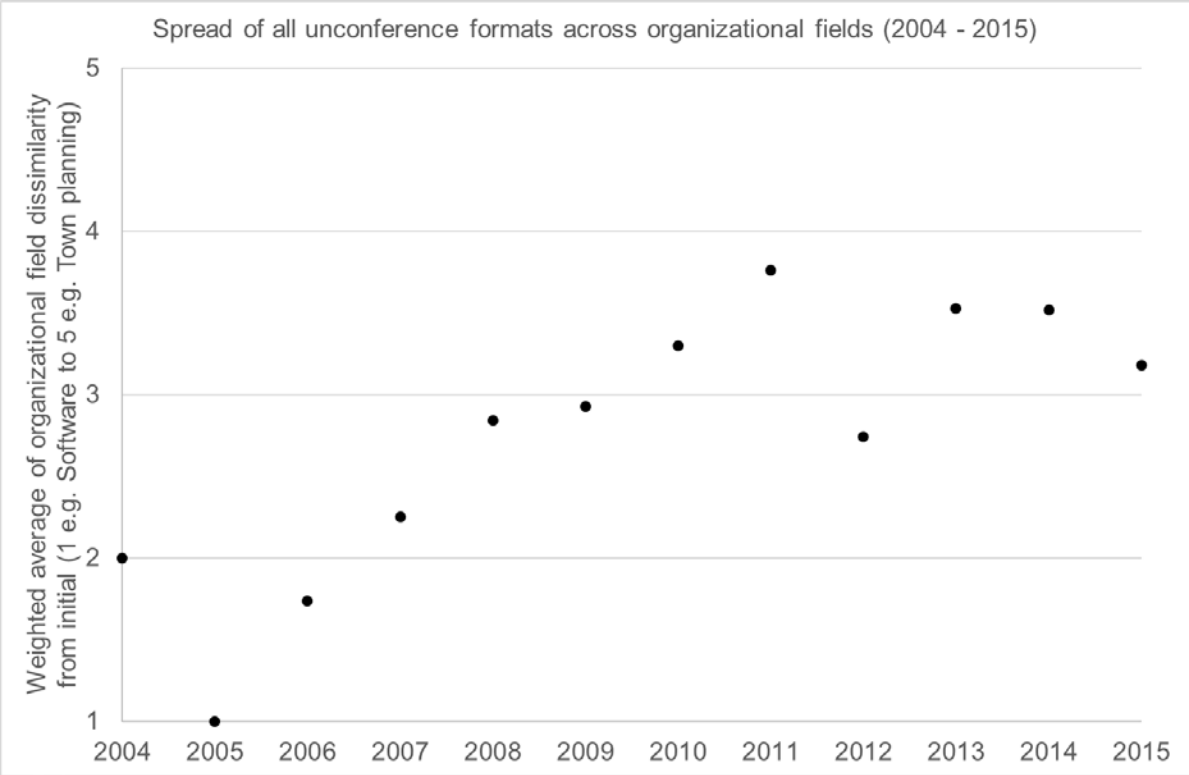


Figure 3: Changes in the format of unconferences

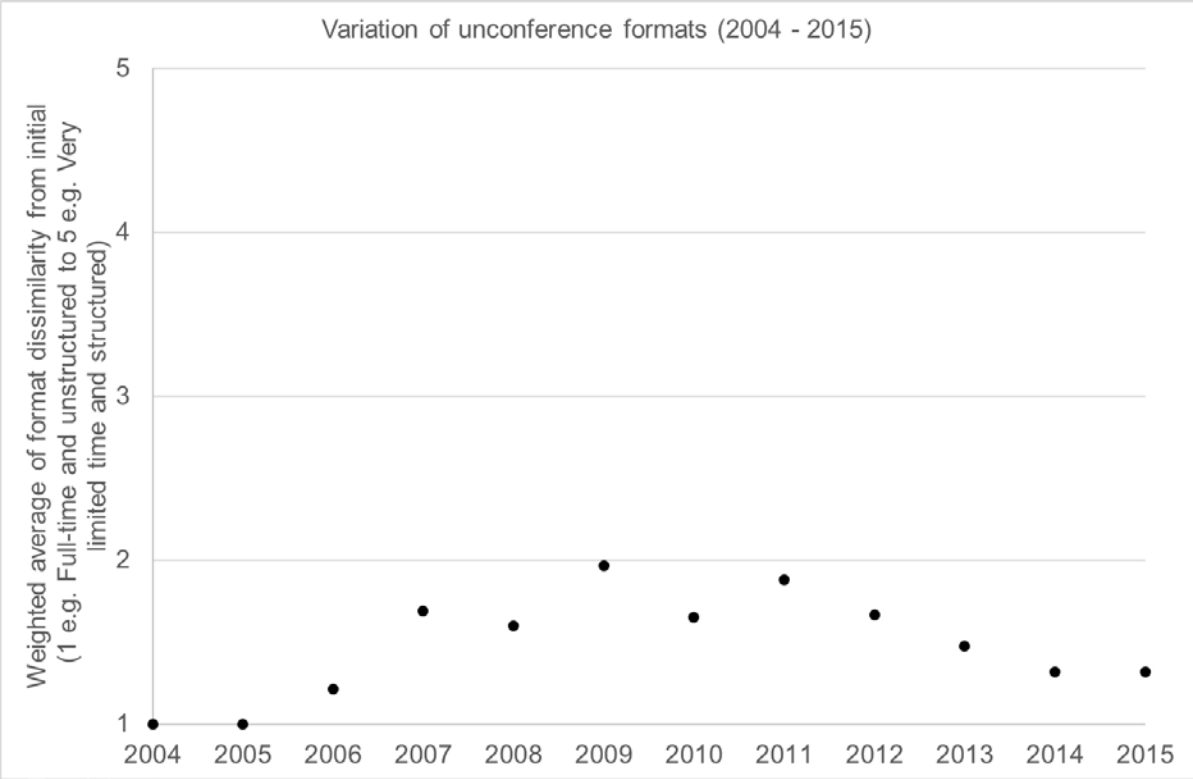
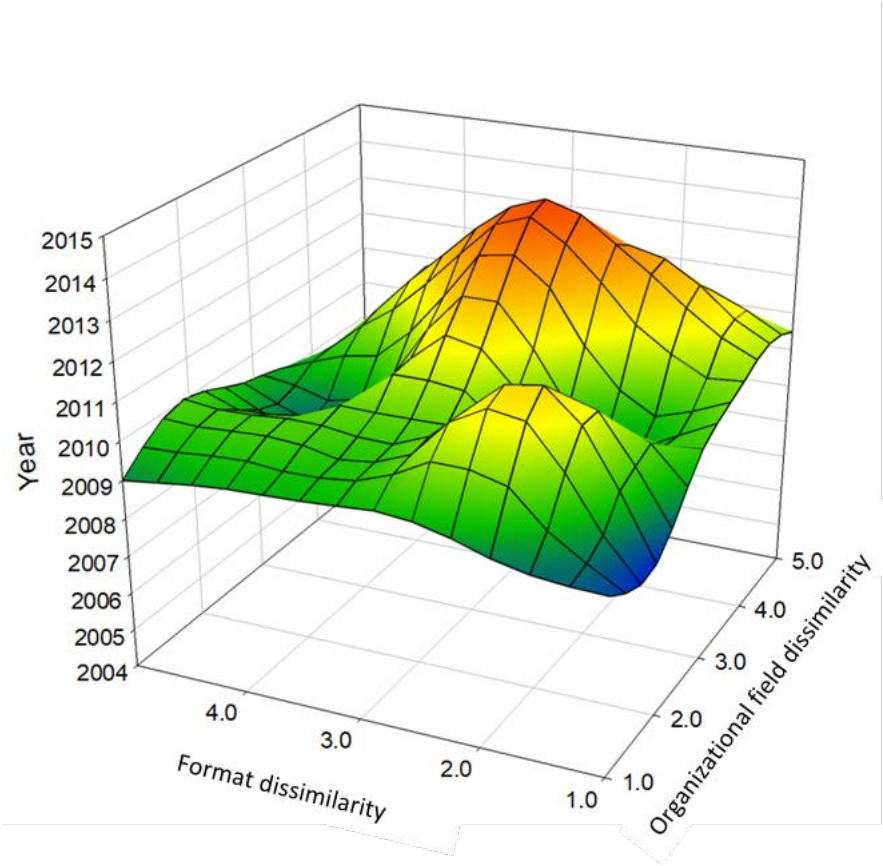
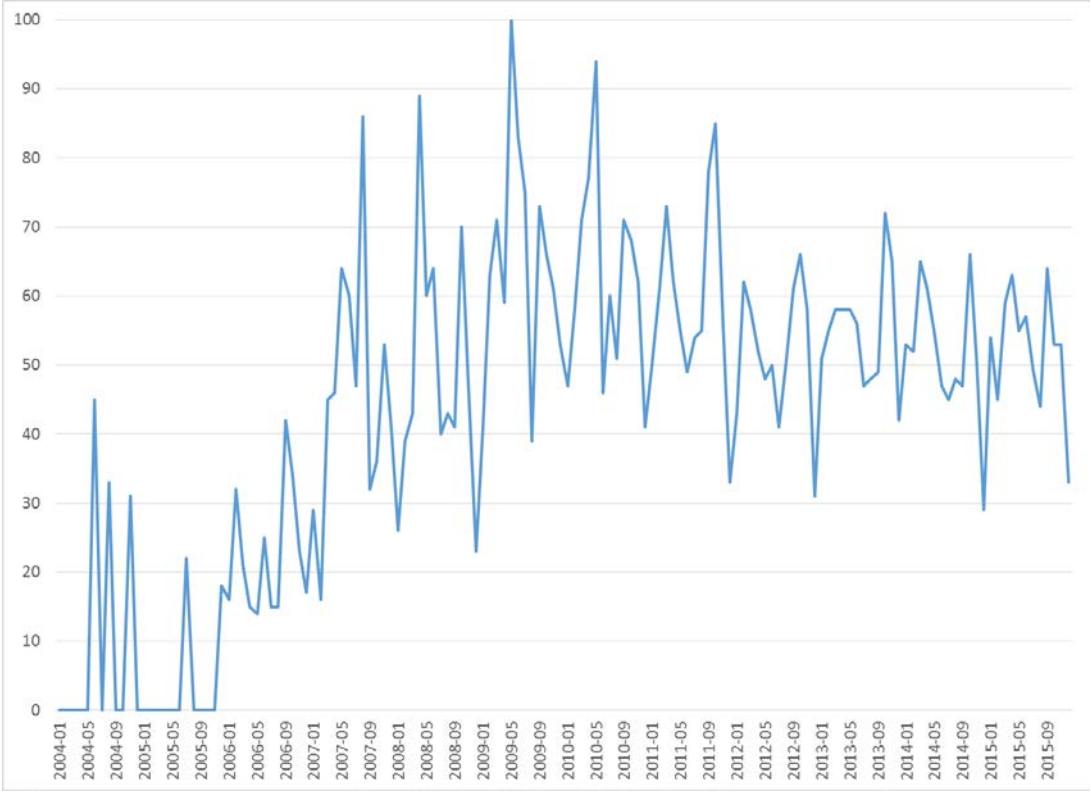


Figure 4: Relationship between organizational field dissimilarity and format dissimilarity by year



Appendix

Google trends analysis of the use of the term ‘Unconference’. 100 indicates the peak usage in May 2009.