



Locating local knowledge in global networks: Scouting in fashion and football



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 January 2016

Received in revised form 3 March 2017

Accepted 6 March 2017

Available online 27 March 2017

Keywords:

Global networks

Local knowledge

Trade networks

Scouting

Talent search

Relational work

Recognition work

ABSTRACT

How do market actors search for and source local knowledge in global commercial networks? We investigate the origins of local knowledge by studying the work practices of scouts in two comparative global trades: fashion modelling and football. Based on ethnographic and interview data, we find that scouts depend upon local knowledge at both the periphery and the core of their trade networks. To source local knowledge, they engage in two key activities. The first is 'relational work', the bridging of physical distances across networks by building ties with potential exchange partners. Scouts also engage in 'recognition work' as they hone expertise to identify raw skill in remote locations and match it to shifting trends at the networks' core. This study finds that distinct forms of relational and recognition work are employed to identify and source local knowledge at the network's periphery and core. We conclude that given the centrality of sourcing local knowledge, scouts will remain central in global commerce.

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1. Introduction

We live in the age of global trade. The design, production and distribution of products are conducted at different locations around the globe and coordinated through the Internet. Yet the seemingly flawless exchange of information, goods and services at the global level can overshadow the importance of local conditions in structuring that commerce (Lucking-Reiley, 2000; Takhteyev, 2012). In fact, the role played by knowledge and know-how which are deeply grounded in specific locales in structuring commercial networks, both local and global, has been a persistent finding in economic sociology (Oberschall & Leifer, 1986; Uzzi, 1997). Yet relatively little is known about the social organization of the search and sourcing of local knowledge in global commercial networks. Centering on the role and expertise of brokers, this study explores the organizational underpinnings of the search and sourcing of local knowledge in two global scouting networks: fashion modeling and professional football.

We examine two practices central to the search for and sourcing of local knowledge, both of which manifest along the value chains in our two scouting networks. We call the first 'relational work', referring to the constitution and maintenance of social ties in economic settings (Zelizer, 2012), which, in turn, provides the social infrastructure for the sourcing of local information and know-how. The second practice we call 'recognition work', referring to the body of professional skills and rules of thumb which guide the search for talent.

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Each is pivotal to the search and sourcing of local knowledge in the two trade networks. We further demonstrate that the nature of local knowledge deemed central to the search and exploitation of talent differs depending on actors' location in the network's core—in centrally-connected major markets—or the periphery. As a consequence, the sourcing process differs when executed in the networks' periphery versus the core. This article explores and explains the nature and organization of recognition and relational work in the networks' periphery and core, and draws more general conclusions about the social underpinnings of local knowledge in global trade networks.

On the face of it, the global trades in fashion models and football players involve the search for individuals with objective physical qualities and capacities like height, fitness, and speed. However, we discovered that scouts search for a broad range of indefinite qualities like social skills in new talent. Because it involves the search for ambiguously defined talent, scouting for both fashion models and football players gives rise to elaborate subcontracting systems involving local, regional and global agencies. Drawing from original ethnographic research on fashion modeling, with a focus on scouting in Russia, and on in-depth interviews with professional football players, agents, scouts and sports journalists, with a focus on Israeli clubs—we identify the network structures of each field and specify the roles of multiple players. Because of the centrality of scouting practices in mediating local and global aspects of trade, we focus on their role in global trade rather than on the scout as a distinct professional position (e.g. [Franssen & Kuipers, 2013](#); [Friedman, 2014](#)).

The global trades in football players and fashion models both involve the exchange of human beings, a practice with clear colonial overtones of stronger economies extracting value from weaker ones. Scouts search in economically weak countries for raw talent, which is then uprooted from home to generate value and profit in advanced urban economies in places like London and Milan. Both models and football players have short professional careers, and thus limited opportunity to make money, and so the trade in bodies in both cases requires strategic decision making. While similar, the two networks diverge in terms of the gender of the bodies traded and in terms of specific sources of uncertainty, making them especially productive cases for exploring generalizable features of local constraints on global networks. Given the complexity of the global search for talent—both the challenge of identifying it and of sorting through the high number of internationally dispersed contenders—these cases lend insight into the organization of local knowledge and can help explain scouts' roles in coordinating other types of global commercial networks. Before we delve into our field study, we offer definitions and review of our key theoretical concepts: local knowledge, recognition work and relational work.

2. Local knowledge and its role in global trade

Scholars have developed typologies of knowledge within different disciplines such as sociology of science ([Collins, 1995](#); [Latour & Woolgar, 1979](#)), organization studies ([Barley, 1996](#); [Yanow, 2014](#)), anthropology ([Geertz, 1978](#)) and urban and regional planning ([Arnstein, 1969](#)). A common thread throughout these typologies is the juxtaposition of formal (or articulated) knowledge and local (or contextual) knowledge. Formal knowledge is easily articulated, and is acquired through academic or technical training in formal institutions. Formal knowledge is abstracted from a specific locale to create generalized statements or rules. By contrast, local knowledge is deeply rooted in a specific social context, and is based on practical experience. Following [Yanow \(2014:12\)](#), we define local knowledge as: "... the very mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience."

The role of local knowledge in shaping scientific networks has been extensively theorized in social studies of science, particularly in studies of science in action ([Collins, 1974, 1995](#)). While science can be seen as a system that produces and distributes certified, formal knowledge, the process of certification involves the utilization and creation of knowledge that is deeply embedded within particular locales and communities of practitioners ([Fruin, 1997](#)). Elements of local knowledge, such as embodied, encultured and semiotic knowledge, empirical studies assert, are pivotal in conducting scientific work ([Collins, 1995](#); [Latour & Woolgar, 1979](#)). Within scientific networks such as 'invisible colleges' ([Crane, 1972](#)), local knowledge is conveyed through the constitution of face-to-face interaction, and co-practice in diverse settings such as high-tech firms and agricultural commerce ([Darr & Talmud, 2002](#)). In scientific lab collaboration, Barley observes semiotic knowledge, which he defines as 'the ability to make sense of subtle differences in the appearance of materials and the behavior of machines' (1996:425); social interaction among experienced and inexperienced lab technicians constitutes an important medium for communicating 'semiotic' understanding of subtleties of workplace practice ([Barley, 1996](#); see also [Aspers, 2006](#) on 'contextual knowledge' in cultural industries).

Studies of trade networks have repeatedly demonstrated that when economic exchange involves a high dependence on local knowledge or skills, traders tend to develop a close-knit network of social ties, which they maintain over time ([Uzzi, 1997](#)). Local knowledge has been seen to play an important role in global networks in different trading sectors ([Darr & Talmud, 2002](#)). For example, rice in South East Asia is traded on a spot market, whose participants are connected mainly by 'arm's-length' ties, while raw rubber, whose quality depends on a variety of local conditions and is thus much harder to assess, is sold through a network of stable ties ([Oberschall & Leifer, 1986](#)).

As we shall see, local conditions are an important source of uncertainty in the scouting networks we studied. Scouts devise different practices to construct local social ties, which are central to sourcing local knowledge—what we call 'relational work'—and to evaluate local talent and to trade through the application of semiotic knowledge—what we call 'recognition work.'

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