

# Entrepreneurial Intermediation in Innovation

## A Study of Multilayered Contexts and Embedded Dynamics of Organisation-creation

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# Entrepreneurial Intermediation in Innovation: A Study of Multilayered Contexts and Embedded Dynamics of Organisation-Creation

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## ABSTRACT

The article is based on a theoretical exploration and empirical analysis of formalized public initiated instruments—eight network entrepreneurs—intended to promote, intermediate and support innovation and entrepreneurship in firms and firm networks located in three different business areas in Mid-Norway: food value chain, experience industries, and renewable energy and environmental technology. The article intends to explore how the intermediation perspectives in innovation theory could be combined with the entrepreneuring perspective in entrepreneurship theory, to build an alternative analytic approach to understand and explain contextually and dynamically embedded organisation-creation, better than the innovation-intermediation and the entrepreneuring perspectives separately are capable of. By inventing a *tertius* typology representing six archetypes of organization-creative action and strategies inherent in all innovative and entrepreneurial firm development, intermediation and entrepreneuring are seen as interwoven processes constantly emerging, evolving and interacting in multilayered contexts and dynamics of organisation-creation. Embeddedness or contextuality factors of all kinds are at work in every process of becoming and in spacing of newness, the primary goal for entrepreneurship and innovation *suis generis*. Accordingly, the article explores the traditional conceptions of change, entrepreneurship and innovation by contrasting them with process and event philosophical perspectives of firm development.

## KEY-WORDS

ENTREPRENEURING, INNOVATION-INTERMEDIATION, NETWORK ENTREPRENEUR, CONTEXT, ORGANISATION-CREATION

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## 1. Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to combine an innovation-intermediation (II) perspective from innovation theory with a process perspective on entrepreneurship (entrepreneur<sup>1</sup>) from entrepreneurship theory, and to use this framework to analyse three separate contexts of entrepreneurial intermediation in innovation. Such an approach represents a different and possibly promising theoretical contribution towards enhancing our ability to study and analyse contextually embedded business organisation-creation, which in turn contributes to making entrepreneurship research open and attentive to a more diverse set of business formation processes.

The paper analyses empirical material from a study of a formalised publicly initiated instrument called network entrepreneur<sup>2</sup> (NE). Eight NEs were at work in three different business contexts and sectors (NE priority areas), following a 10-year regional R&D and innovation programme conducted in Mid-Norway. The NE was an instrument used to strengthen the innovation and entrepreneurship capacities and capabilities of businesses and business networks in the region<sup>3</sup>. We have previously developed a *tertius* typology (Carlsson and Sletterød, 2010; Sletterød and Carlsson, 2014) as an analytical tool designed to reveal and better understand the challenges and opportunities involved in business organisation-creation (NE practices). We have applied the typology in the present study as part of the framework involving the merging and combination of innovation and entrepreneurship theory.

In the following sections a coherent framework for the development of networking and networked businesses is presented and discussed, and we contribute to an exploration of how entrepreneur<sup>1</sup> and innovation-intermediation can be seen as complementary analytical perspectives in business development and research. It is argued that intermediation is an entrepreneurial process that clears the way for “entrepreneur<sup>1</sup>” and organisation-creation.

### *1.1 A brief clarification of the empirical contexts of the study*

The NEs operated mainly in three selected industrial sectors: food value chain, experience industries<sup>4</sup>, and renewable energy and environmental technology. The contextual differences and characteristics of the businesses in these sectors were significant. A comparison of scores from a set of

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<sup>1</sup> The analytical concept of “entrepreneur<sup>1</sup>” was introduced by Steyaert and Hjorth (2003), developed by Gartner (2012) and further outlined and elaborated by Hjorth (2012; 2014a) in parallel with the process-philosophical basis of the concept (Hjorth, 2014b; Hjorth et al., 2015).

<sup>2</sup> This concept is taken from Ronald Burt’s “The network entrepreneur” (2000b).

<sup>3</sup> Research into the NE instrument (2008-2014) was part of a major regional innovation program financed by the Research Council of Norway and several public sector partners in the period 2007-2016.

<sup>4</sup> Experience industry or experience-based industry represent concepts for capturing a fundamental and often overseen driver for value-added in economic activities of a firm (the experience itself). The firms that are primarily studied and referred to in this article are festivals, firms doing culturally based tourism, producing film, music, and video.

discriminating variables such as size of business, agglomerations, business networks, rural versus urban settings, innovation logics at work, knowledge bases applied, current plans and strategies, developmental needs, degree of co-location, availability of R&D and innovation instruments, temporary business clusters formed, completed sector-initiated research and program-initiated R&D at work, revealed a complex and diffuse picture with no clearly structured patterns (Carlsson and Sletterød, 2010; Sletterød and Carlsson, 2014). At the beginning of the innovation programme (2007-2016), the food value chain and the renewable energy and environmental technology sectors were well established and were more complex and highly developed than the experience industries sector, which was younger, relatively simply structured and only moderately developed. Furthermore, the three sectors were highly separated and experienced little or no interaction. Of the eight active NEs, two were in the food value chain, two in the experience industries, and four in the renewable energy and environmental technology sector.

Because we lacked a theory of entrepreneurial intermediation in innovation, our study has entailed the design of a fresh organisation-creation typology.

## **2. Designing an organisation-creation typology by merging theories of innovation-intermediation and entrepreneuring**

An extensive review of international literature focusing on “innovation/knowledge intermediation” and “innovation brokerage”, carried out by Sletterød and Carlsson (*ibid.*), identified three well-established and frequently applied typologies related to brokerage and network entrepreneur roles (Gould and Fernandez, 1989), II activities or intermediary functions (Howells, 2006), and core competencies related to II (Håkanson, Caessens and MacAulay, 2011).

Our ambition was to identify typologies that could help to conceptualise the *modus operandi* of the NEs by more precisely analysing how they carried out their tasks, performed their roles, fulfilled their expected functions, and actualised their competencies in the three respective sectors or business contexts of multilayered embeddedness in Mid-Norway’s regional innovation system (Carlsson and Sletterød, 2010). This study provides an empirical exploration and description of how the NEs operated and reveals a number of similarities and differences in their various approaches resulting from contextual differences. Gould and Fernandez (1989) have presented a comparable typology consisting of five brokerage roles at various levels of embedding. These are: (i) the *coordinator*, which involves enhancing, coordinating and developing cooperative actions and collaborative relations between businesses and within business networks and clusters; (ii) the *gatekeeper*, which facilitates relevant and adequate access to information that is beneficial to the networks/clusters; (iii) the *representative*, which disseminates knowledge to individual firms and networks/clusters; (iv) the *cosmopolitan*, which searches for the optimal and most beneficial use of personal relations and networks within the NEs with the aim of establishing contacts with key persons; and finally (v), the *liaison*, which consolidates and enhances business interaction between the firms and the overall

ethos of interaction, cooperation and collaboration between business networks and clusters.

Howells (2006) has developed a typology consisting of ten key innovation intermediary functions resulting from his review of existing literature. The first, *foresight and diagnostics*, focuses on applying adequate techniques and appropriate methods to predict future developmental trends with the aim of selecting and generating wise strategies to meet upcoming challenges. *Scanning and information processing* concerns obtaining a swift overview of a situation or “problem panorama” to process information in adequate and appropriate ways with the aim of identifying smart solutions. *Knowledge processing and combination/recombination* involves: (a) connecting and combining the existing knowledge and competencies of collaborating business partners, and (b) enhancing the creation of needs-oriented, competence-related and purposeful business interaction that links key types of knowledge and core competencies within the firms and business networks involved. The *gatekeeping and brokering* function entails intermediation involving both existing knowledge and experience-based know-how within the firms or business networks in question in connection with innovative and co-creative strategies related to wise/best practice value creation. *Testing and validation* relates to the implementation of competent and qualified tests in order to verify and sanction adequate knowledge-based strategies with a view to designing actions and legitimising decision-making. The intermediary function *accreditation* relates to actual business assistance based on a formal recognition of the competence held by the intermediary, and/or by the meeting of formal requests by means of carrying out specific tasks in appropriate ways. *Validation and regulation* concerns identification of the key criteria for business cooperation, the brokering of ideas, and the establishment of common goals required for business interaction between businesses, networks and clusters of businesses in the respective sectors, or between businesses in their respective positions in the relevant value chains. According to Howells (ibid), the *commercialisation* function involves the implementation of market analysis and assistance in the making of business plans and, finally, the identification of relevant sources of funding and financing. The function *protecting the results* provides protection of the outcome of the collaborations, involving advice on intellectual property rights and client management. Finally, *evaluation of outcomes* addresses the general assessment of performance and technologies, including a specific evaluation of those products and technologies currently operating in the market, and is carried out in parallel with the “foresight and diagnostics” function. Although this is not explicitly articulated in the article, we argue that all ten of the functions formulated by Howells require a proper and effective in-depth analysis of embeddedness.

Håkanson, Caessens and MacAulay (2011) present three core competencies that are essential to the achievement of best practice in innovation-intermediation. The first of these is *network spanning*, which involves an ability to establish and maintain relations across business sectors with complementary (technological and organisational) needs and challenges, but with little or no existing interaction. *Organisational memory* addresses internal organisational relations, links and II routines, including quality systems that involve the filing of codified information combined with extensive social and professional interaction between innovation intermediaries in regional innovation systems (RIS) or other innovation contexts. Finally, *credibility as mediator*, specifically

focuses on the reliability of the intermediary or broker based on the quality of the work performed, contracts entered, payoffs, reputation and ultimate success.

The *tertius* typology developed by Carlsson and Sletterød (2010) was inspired by the work of Ronald Burt and David Obstfeld. Georg Simmel was the first to introduce the neologism *tertius gaudens* in his treatise on the “Triad” (Simmel, 1908; 1950) and defined the concept by means of “the third who by controlling the gateway can extract rent”. Originally, this concept was developed for the analysis of social interaction in general and was not specifically directed at business interaction or the study of entrepreneurship. We have carried out a detailed study of Simmel’s original work with the aim of identifying his intentions with a view to comparing and contrasting them with the analytical concepts of Burt and Obstfeld. In doing so, we have identified a potential to enrich our understanding of the NE as an innovative intermediary who can boost the entrepreneurial or organisation-creation capacity of businesses. We directed our focus on describing and analysing more precisely the roles, functions, activities and competencies required to conduct effective intermediation for diverse examples of embeddedness of businesses (see Table 1). Our study concluded that Burt’s theoretical variant on the *tertius gaudens* differed somewhat from the meaning originally attributed to the concept by Simmel. To Burt it meant “the third who benefits”. In our opinion, Burt’s interpretation represents a strategy aimed at filling and utilising the structural holes that appear in networks (Burt, 1992; 1997; 2000a; 2004; 2005). His theory suggests that certain actors hold specific positional advantages and disadvantages resulting from their embeddedness. Accordingly, a structural hole is a gap (a missing link or lack of relations) between two actors that possess complementary sources, or access to important resources, such as information and knowledge, in a homogeneous or heterogeneous socially embedded business setting<sup>5</sup>. The theory relies on the fundamental idea that the homogeneity of information, new ideas, and innovation capacity is generally higher and more consistent *within* any given group of actors, such as an individual business or network of businesses, than is the situation *between* two groups of actors. In our view this presupposes the existence of degrees of uniform or shared embeddedness.

According to Burt, an actor that serves as an intermediary between two businesses stands to gain important competitive advantages over the businesses between which he or she serves. Serving as a “bridge” between businesses enables the intermediary to identify sensitive information held by the businesses and to hide valuable information related to their competitiveness or capacity to create value. An intermediary is also able to combine all the ideas that he or she obtains from these different sources and come up with potentially the most innovative and advantageous ideas of all. However, an intermediary also occupies a precarious position, because business relations between disparate groups, in terms of their respective knowledge bases and competitiveness, can be risk-laden and fragile. If any hidden strategies to optimise the intermediary’s self-interest at the

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<sup>5</sup> See also Granovetter (1985) pointing that all economic actions are embedded in structures of social relations.

expense of mutual tripartite interests are exposed and compromised, the three-party constellation will rapidly disintegrate. In our opinion, this is a legitimate scenario only in specific tripartite situations where the intention of the supposed intermediary is to obtain benefits for him/herself, and to strengthen his/her own position by playing the two businesses against each other. In fact, this is not intermediation as articulated in the intentions of the NE as defined in our study. The eight NEs involved all operated with an explicit mission to build prosperous business relations and innovative networks by releasing the potential co-creative capabilities of joint value creation, and in doing so to make themselves superfluous and their business relations sustainable as the key drivers of shared organisation-creation efforts. Such missions encapsulate the holistic concept of “the three”, by which all parties benefit mutually from the active entrepreneurship of the intermediary.

Obstfeld (2005) introduced an alternative analytical metaphor of intermediation, the *tertius iungens*, meaning “the third who joins”. This concept is more in line with the original meaning of Simmel’s *tertius gaudens* (Carlsson and Sletterød, 2010; Sletterød and Carlsson, 2014). Obstfeld suggests that sparse networks and structural gaps represent ideal strategic opportunities for the creation of new ideas and the optimisation of information flows, adding however that such networks are poorly suited for action and resource mobilization. Obstfeld also applies the *iungens* concept to describe a situation involving an explicit intention to utilise close-knit social networks as a means of gathering the resources necessary to carry out innovation within an organisation. We consider it reasonable to describe an organisation-creation process in the homogeneous setting of embeddedness or as part of a shared social-cultural dynamic. Obstfeld’s concept thus also incorporates a behavioural aspect oriented towards connecting people in social networks either by introducing disconnected individuals or by facilitating new interactive coordination between already connected individuals. Obstfeld argues that an intermediary can engage in one or many of four types of action. He or she may:

1. coordinate action between two removed parties with no immediate prospects of connection;
2. actively maintain and exploit a separation;
3. introduce or further facilitate pre-existing ties (Obstfeld calls these *brief iungens* relations);
4. introduce or facilitate interaction between parties while maintaining an essentially coordinative role over time (Obstfeld calls these *sustained iungens*).

The *tertius iungens* concept describes the assembling of resources that are important and necessary for Schumpeterian innovation, a concept that in our view shares similarities with entrepreneuring as organisation-creation (Hjorth, 2014a). With the concepts of Simmel, Burt and Obstfeld in mind, we argue that analyses of entrepreneuring as organisation-creation benefit primarily from Obstfeld’s conceptualization of a synergetic process, not least because in his model, intermediation is necessarily more embedded (it has “joined” the network), and a greater “whole” can be achieved by relinquishing ownership of added value (Austin and Devin, 2003; Austin, Hjorth and Hessel, 2018). While Burt’s idea describes competition and the maximisation of individual interest, Obstfeld’s concept focuses on cooperation, collaboration and team interaction.

## 2.1 *The tertius typology*

Carlsson and Sletterød (2010) developed a theoretical framework or typology used to describe, analyse, and understand the processes conducted by NEs as an embedded practice<sup>6</sup> of organisation-creation, what we now choose to call “entrepreneurship”. This typology describes the archetypes of entrepreneurship actions that are necessary to achieve something new, to bring this innovation into being, and consequently to create organisations by means of a *tertius* process. From a processual perspective, we can describe this in terms of Hjorth’s statement (2014a: 111): “how entrepreneurship *becomes* will ultimately explain what entrepreneurship *is*, and the question of how it processually *becomes* is the concern of entrepreneurship”. When such a process perspective is imposed on Carlsson and Sletterød’s (2010) *tertius* typology, we see that their types emerge as six mutually equivalent archetypes of actions driving the component processes involved in “becoming new”, entrepreneurship (organisation-creation) and in creating any new value that may result. As is the case with Obstfeld’s *iungens* concept, an understanding of these six archetypes demands a recognition of their embeddedness in a local context. The six archetypal roles are described as follows:

- *Tertius liberarens*: the third who initiates utopian foresight, and in doing so facilitates innovative thinking leading to the development of radical and new business targets and prospects (by unlocking entirely new organisation-creation opportunities).
- *Tertius crearens*: the third who questions the status quo by using poetic and playful language and artful methods to make visible and accessible new co-creative actions leading to organisation-creation (by taking advantage of embedded utopian creative powers that are already at hand).
- *Tertius vivere*: the third who contributes towards establishing a wise practice of innovative dialogue and cooperation not only between employer and employees and between firms in business networks, but also between firms positioned along common value chains (by releasing the opportunities embedded in development-oriented co-creative dialogue).
- *Tertius reperire*: the third who makes use of individual or collective creative and innovative capacities to identify fresh and different destinations and opportunities for innovation (by revealing wise, embedded organisation-creation practices and opportunities for organisation-creation).
- *Tertius solvere*: the third who supports a business rationality released from the constraints of intellectual closure, group-think and the neglect of innovative thought and action, and promotes an emergence from intolerance and xenophobia by welcoming the active application of serendipity (by welcoming and inviting all the embedded “otherness” that is otherwise already

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<sup>6</sup> The terms *tertius liberarens*, *tertius crearens*, *tertius vivere*, *tertius reperire*, *tertius solvere*, *tertius ducere* and *quaerere* can all be seen as complementary and amplifying variants of the *tertius iungens* of Obstfeld and Simmel’s original *tertius gaudens*.



present and ready for use in the influencing of organisation-creation).

- *Tertius ducerens and quaerens*: the third who leads, seeks and introduces new and habit-breaking approaches to the management of creativity and innovation (by encouraging the management of organisation-creation, disputing accepted destinies, and promoting embeddedness as the final determinant of what is possible).

In this paper, we use these six archetypes of entrepreneurial action to describe and analyse the intermediation processes in empirical cases of practice involving the aforementioned NEs. We can state categorically that these archetypes describe entrepreneuring as a process of intermediation. Such intermediation is embedded in local contexts, and we consider it unreasonable to introduce rigid principles or clearly traceable causalities that can be used to generalise its identification or emergence. However, we also believe that the six archetypes represent a significant improvement on the established ability of research to analyse entrepreneuring as an intermediation process. We thus propose that an understanding of the aforementioned *tertius* archetypes is descriptive of intermediation as an organisation-creation process, which in turn contributes towards creating a greater whole. Intermediation in this sense generates potential for the creation of new value as an outcome of the entrepreneurial process. It actualises what is virtually new, sets actions in motion, and identifies ways of releasing this potential. The six *tertius* archetypes contribute towards clearing the path between what is “virtual” and what is “actual”, and make actualisation happen by means of an organisation-creation process that we call “entrepreneuring” (Hjorth, 2014a). Thus, as a means of describing and analysing entrepreneurial intermediation, our theoretical framework becomes generalizable analytically, and can be applied in contextually adapted forms to new empirical cases. In the next section we will elaborate on the concept of entrepreneuring as organisation-creation.

## 2.2 Intermediation as an entrepreneurial process

We understand the term “entrepreneurship” from a process perspective. This means, as previously stated, that we “...put movement, change and flow first; to study processually is to consider the world as restless, something underway, becoming and perishing, without end” (Hjorth, Holt and Steyaert, 2015: 599). Historically, we have adopted the habit of focusing primarily on order and stability, regarding change as a temporary disruption. From a process perspective (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), we identify a “new normal” that focuses instead on how things “become” and eventually perish. In doing so, we can now regard stasis and stability as temporary achievements. This places new demands on our use of a language that is currently accustomed to serve our thinking about “being” rather than “becoming”. Currently, we talk of studying “firm formation”, as opposed to “firming”. We study the process of “entrepreneurship” rather than “entrepreneuring”. Describing the flow of a process enables us to follow it in time and adopt a language that results from observing those that inhabit local contextual realities, from which we understand that their actions are signs (Geertz, 1973; Greenblatt, 1997). Actions become the carriers of meaning, and we can regard them

as being capable of supporting sense-making. This makes qualitative studies an ideal approach to the study of processes because data is generated by ethnographic fieldwork. The approach draws on an anthropological interest in the views of “local” individuals and seeks to study the subject in the context of prioritising such individuals’ descriptions of what they do and their reflections on what their actions mean and how they make sense.

Thinking in terms of process means assigning priority to movement, potentiality, timing and how what “is” has in fact “become” (Helin et al, 2014). In considering the latter, the process philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1993) has suggested, following Henri Bergson, that linguistically we adopt the conceptual pair of “virtuality” and “actuality”. Thus, the “virtual” is real, but lacks actuality. The virtual can also be thought of as an idea, and ideas always appear in great numbers. By saying that something is real, but lacking actuality, is not part of the lived context of people and things. Every actuality, meaning all that is part of our lived experience of people and things, is constantly shadowed by a swarm of virtualities. This in fact is the virtual, or the multiple differential relationships to the actual, of which only one was actualised, and it is this one that becomes the actual. In this context, an “actual firm” is an actualisation of one of a number of different ideas of how to make new value real for its customers. At the beginning, this process possessed multiple virtualities, representing multiple differential relationships to the actual, but ultimately only one was created or actualised. But the virtual remains, shadowing the actual and offering possibilities for actualising something new, adding to, or modifying the actual. Actualisation, or the process by which the virtual becomes the actual, happens by selection, differentiation, and creation. Thus, at any one time, every actual business had multiple virtual business ideas competing for actualisation. The one that is in fact actualised achieved its position by differentiating itself from the already actual, and by “creating its way” into everyday liveable practices (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). In this way, actualisation typically involves the mixing and combining of several virtual ideas to create a path by which the new can enter into the actual, lived world.

Processual, entrepreneurship can be thought as the process of actualising the idea of new value for a user or customer. For this to happen, the virtually new needs to become actualised through a process of differentiation and the creation of all that is required for new value to be offered to potential customers. This requires a process of organisation-creation, what we choose to call “entrepreneuring”. Entrepreneurship is thus the result of entrepreneuring (Hjorth, 2014a). Before a new organisation (a firm or business) exists, there is a proto-organisational form consisting of an assemblage of people, ideas, resources, and things, that are held together by a shared desire to actualise ideas that are essential to the “becoming” of the offer of new value. We can thus regard intermediation as a stage of assembly involved in the entrepreneuring process of creating an organisation (Hjorth, 2014b; Hjorth, Holt and Steyaert, 2015).

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Context and background of the empirical study*

The database for this study is taken from a research process that continued over six years during the period 2008 to 2014. It constitutes part of the Programme for Regional R&D and Innovation (VRI) initiated by the Research Council of Norway (RCN). Professional and financial support was offered to long-term, research-based, developmental processes in functional regions, commonly centred on public sector county and municipal administrations. The initiative was designed to promote greater regional collaboration between trade and industry, R&D institutions, and the public authorities, and to establish closer ties to other Norwegian and international networks and initiatives (RCN, 2007). The RCN organised a Norway-wide, merit-based competition to ensure the quality of the projects and activities funded by the VRI programme. The basic components of the programme included research activities, learning and experience exchange, and collaboration across scientific, professional, and administrative boundaries. This paper is based on the empirical findings from one of the Norwegian regions (Trøndelag in Mid-Norway) and focuses on a predefined work package designed specifically to explore innovation-intermediation and brokerage practices in Trøndelag, with the aim of clarifying the diffuse activities of the network entrepreneur, and the varying contextual conditions network entrepreneurs had to operate in three prioritized industrial sectors.

#### *3.2 Data generation*

The research-based knowledge for this study has been generated using a follow-up collaborative approach by which practitioners and researchers engaged in close and continuous dialogue and co-reflection throughout the research process. The research design was inspired by developmental evaluation (Patton, 2010; Patton, McKegg and Wehipeihana, 2015), trailing research (Finne, Levin and Nilssen, 1995) and action research approaches (Eikeland, 2011; Gjøtterud et al., 2017), and provided the basis for ongoing learning and feedback. The project participants from the various businesses and public agencies were recognised throughout as equal co-producers of knowledge, in line with the principles of “engaged scholarship” (Van de Ven, 2007). This entailed that the researchers involved had to learn from observing phenomena as practiced by the practitioners with the aim of creating current, insightful and relevant knowledge that both improved the practice that is the object of study while at the same time contributing to new theory regarding such practice. This is what we referred to earlier as anthropologically based ethnographic fieldwork. Such studies of local practices in context, and an interest in the descriptions and sense-makings offered by local individuals, offer opportunities to engage in a knowledge creation process that can be fed back into the context under study and be relevant to the practitioners. The main partners in this study were project managers and the regional VRI partnership, which consisted of individuals from research

institutes, universities, local and regional authorities, and the business community in Trøndelag. An experimental research design was prepared, incorporating an analytical approach that included a variety of methods and data collection techniques that were merged by means of creative and improvisational methodological triangulation and parallelism (Sørensen, Mattson and Sundbo, 2010). These included document studies, secondary data analyses, observations, and interviews with informants, respondents and focus groups, combined with the management of, and participation in, seminars focusing on experience exchange and data-based process dialogue meetings and workshops. The research design offered opportunities for both simultaneous and/or sequential inductive, deductive, and abductive approaches to the analysis, all with a qualitative methodological foundation. At least two researchers participated in the interviews and other primary data collection methods. Notes were taken and transcribed, and subsequently cross-checked for accuracy and nuance, reliability, and precision.

### *3.3 Analytical design*

The data collected provided a basis for identifying and systematizing types of intermediations, functions and tasks. The various intermediation roles were analysed across a broad basis in relation to factors such as role performance, instrument optimisation and the network orchestration of companies and business clusters (cf. Klerks and Aarts, 2013). Broadly speaking, the analytical design that moved the research process from empirical design to theoretical insight followed four steps. Firstly, a preliminary interpretation of the data was generated by means of a comparison and discussion of themes conducted by the research team. Secondly, identified themes were clustered into preliminary, empirically based concepts, followed by further discussions within the research team. These clusters were then cross-checked by means of follow-up interviews with the NEs and additional dialogue within the VRI partnership. These dialogues focused on theme-related redundancies and/or preliminary concepts that could be clustered into more general categories. Thirdly, a “conversation” was conducted addressing both the study’s theoretical framework and its empirical concepts, by means of analytical discussions grounded in the theoretical framework. This process resulted in an extended theoretical framework. Fourthly, new concepts were added, and the extended theoretical framework was challenged by further empirical insights and subsequently revised. Emerging insights were also made relevant to practice (see step 2, above). The outcomes of these analyses, representing the results of the study, are presented in the discussion section of this paper, whereas the revision and refinement of the theoretical framework leading from the empirical study are described in the following section. A summary of the theoretical and practical contributions of this study is presented in the final section of the paper.

#### **4. The multilayered contextual embeddedness of the NE practices in a regional innovation programme**

The network entrepreneurs that constitute the focus of this study represent a new agency introduced to boost entrepreneurship and innovation in individual firms and business networks centred in Mid-Norway. The aim was to create enduring innovative capability and value creation in firms and business networks in three priority sectors: (i) food value chain, (ii) experience industries, and (iii) renewable energy and environmental technology.

This initiative was backed by a three-fold strategy. The first objective was to establish a focus on building a constructive team spirit among employees and managers with the aim of enhancing the combined creative and innovative drivers within the businesses concerned. More specifically, the ambition was to establish an ethos or mindset within each of the businesses based on a clearly defined set of values designed to enhance reciprocal recognition, trust, climate for dialogue, broad (both vertical and lateral) levels of participation, and playful learning. The second objective was to create, consolidate and develop business relations between the businesses and business networks, and the third to contribute to the development of innovative and creative relations between individual businesses and the networks within which the businesses operate.

The second and third objectives necessitated progress towards the first, which in turn required that the networks made genuine efforts to explore and exploit the mutual value of the advantages and innovative capabilities gained from business relationships established with the assistance of the NEs. The competencies required to achieve this were consequently related to, or the result of, the innovation-intermediation skills or entrepreneuring capabilities provided by the NEs involved (Sletterød and Carlsson, 2014).

The main aim of Sletterød and Carlsson (*ibid.*) was thus to show how their six archetypical perspectives of the actions and processes involved in “becoming” could be applied analytically to reveal the diversity in the functions and roles performed by the NEs, and how the multiplicity and complexity of the network entrepreneuring and intermediating processes were situated and incorporated in the mindsets of the four broadly recognized typologies widely applied in innovation network theory.

**Table 1. A summary comparison of the varying business contexts and the NEs' practices in the three NE priority business areas in Mid-Norway**

NE priority areas	Intermediation typologies			
	<i>Tertius</i> orientation	Brokerage roles	Functions	Core competency
	<i>T1 Tertius gaudens (Burt)</i>	<i>R1 Coordinator</i>	<i>F/A-2 Scanning and information processing</i>	<i>C-1 Network spanning</i>
	<i>T2 Tertius iungens (Obstfeld)</i>	<i>R2 Gatekeeper</i>	<i>F/A-3 Knowledge processing and combination / recombination</i>	<i>C-2 Organisational memory</i>
	<i>T3 Tertius liberarens</i>	<i>R3 Representative</i>		<i>C-3 Credibility as a mediator</i>
	<i>T4 Tertius crearens</i>	<i>R4 Cosmopolitan</i>	<i>F/A-7 Regulation and arbitration</i>	<i>C-3.1 Reputation</i>
	<i>T5 Tertius vivere</i>	<i>R5 Liaison</i>		<i>C-3.2 Neutral status</i>
	<i>T6 Tertius reperire</i>		<i>F/A-9 Commercialization</i>	<i>C-3.3 Requisite ignorance</i>
	<i>T7 Tertiusolvere</i>			<i>C-3.4 Planned process management</i>
	<i>T8 Tertius ducere et quaerere</i>			
<b>Food value chain (2 NEs active)</b>	T2-4	R1-5	F/A-2,3	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-3.1-4
<b>Experience industries (2 NEs active)</b>	T2, T4-7	R1-5	F/A-2,3	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-3.1-3
<b>Renewable energy and environmental technology (4 NEs active)</b>	T2-5, T8	R1-5	F/A-2,3,7,9	C-1, C-2, C-3, C-3.1-4

Source: Sletterød and Carlsson (2014: 164).

The following functions are not listed in Table 1: F/A-1 foresight and diagnostics; F/A-4 gatekeeping and brokering; F/A-5 testing and validation; F/A-6 accreditation; F/A-8 protecting the results; and F/A-10 assessment and evaluation. These fail to meet the intermediation needs demanded by the three priority areas as defined for the RIS Trøndelag (NEs evaluation). As a result, they are not included in any further analyses. The same applies to the core competencies C-1.1 recruitment, and C-1.3 embedded engagement.

#### 4.1 A brief comparative empirical analysis of NE practice

In the following, we seek to describe the *tertius* orientations, main brokerage roles, and key functions, activities and services offered by the network entrepreneurs, and the core competencies

that they employ. The issues here are to identify what knowledge and services network entrepreneurs offer and what actions they take, and then to approach an understanding of their work by utilising concepts established in the three typologies of innovation-intermediation and compare these with our *tertius* orientations.

All network entrepreneurs involved in the RIS Trøndelag offered two main types of service or activity:

- *Scanning and information processing* (F/A-2). Empirically, this activity corresponds closely to the role of the *gatekeeper* (R2).
- *Knowledge processing and combination/recombination* (F/A-3). Empirically, this activity corresponds closely to the role of the *representative* (R3).

In their empirical study, Sletterød and Carlsson (2014) identified the *tertius iungens* (T2, the third who joins) as an NE orientation that cut across all priority areas of operation, and which represented a strategy that served to consolidate existing collaborative business relations and interactions. The *coordinator*, *cosmopolitan* and *liaison* are roles likely to be categorized under the T2 orientation.

The *tertius crearens* orientation (T4, the third who creates/uncovers) serves to reveal new opportunities and strategies for decision-making and business initiatives in the fields of value creation and innovation. The following functions are likely to be categorized under the T4 orientation; *gatekeeper*, *representative*, *scanning and information processing*, *knowledge processing and combination/recombination*.

The three main “C” competencies listed in Table 1 represent the critical core skill orientations that NEs require in order to perform innovation-intermediation tasks. According to Håkanson, Caessens and MacAulay (2011) these encompass an ability to:

- maintain and sustain important relations and contacts otherwise not accessible and reachable (*network spanning*, C-1)
- maintain and sustain an individual and collective memory of the substance of cooperation, the interactive partner needs, skills and competences (*organisational memory*, C-2)
- act as a credible broker building reciprocal trust/confidence and reducing risk of unreliable and irresponsible behaviour (*credibility as a mediator*, C-3).

The C3 competency exhibits four subordinate skill sets; C-3.1, C-3.2, C-3.3 and C-3.4, all of which serve to actualise a given set of competencies. The competency C-3.1 (*reputation*) is centred on skills such as reliability, credibility and bipartisanship during the exchange of information and knowledge. Specifically, this represents a so-called *tacit* knowing behaviour among NEs in their social interaction with others. It is referred to as *tacit* because it is socially embedded and thus cannot be grasped outside the social dimension, but only by actively engaging in the rituals linked to social interaction from within. Accordingly, it is incompatible with the intermediation T1 (*tertius gaudens*), as proposed by Burt, because it lacks a social behavioural ethos defined by the recognition and acknowledgement of fundamental social virtues.

The C-3.2 competency (*neutral status*) is operationalized as a form of unbiased position in which the NE exhibits no interest in exploiting any advantages inherent in the information exchanged or in

the results of the exchange relationship. The NE's primary interest here is to create, arrange, organise and facilitate arenas for optimal exchange between relevant businesses in the fields of economics, knowledge, information and resources.

Finally, the C-3.3 competency (*requisite ignorance*) represents a necessary lack of knowledge of, or acquaintance with, the business-related or sector-specific technologies, specialisms or production processes that are in use in the context of his or her intermediation, so-called "entrepreneurship". This competency entails that the NE does not become ensnared in any discourse or paradigms concerning business-related expert knowledge. This form of productive ambiguity or political fluidity enables the NE, at least to a certain extent, to ask critical-constructive questions with no risk of harm, stigmatisation or exclusion from further interaction and collaborative activity. The NE is essentially permitted to practice "parrhesia"<sup>7</sup>—frank and fearless speech. The C-3.4 (*planned process management*) may be seen as an important competence-based action supporting the innovation processes.

Generically, *requisite ignorance*, operationalised by practicing parrhesia, has the potential to contribute towards establishing a new form of creativity in terms of business objective and strategy development, and may serve to open the minds of businesses to unconventional applications of their knowledge and know-how (Håkanson, Caessens and MacAulay, 2011).

In so doing, the practice of parrhesia incorporates the T4 orientation *tertius crearens* (the third who contributes creatively) by enabling different and innovative thinking that may create new opportunities and a revised rationality in terms of decision-making and action within businesses, business clusters and networks. However, it also presupposes an intimate relationship and mutual interplay with the T7 orientation *tertius solverens* (the third who solves), enabling freedom from groupthink and the constraints of conformity in thoughts and action. Such intermediation behaviour offers an important counterpoint to intolerance and xenophobia and is a close relative of playful and artful organisation-creation.

The T7 orientation explicitly assumes the practice of parrhesia, by which NEs are able freely and with integrity to voice critical statements and opinions, but in ways that offer relief and liberation. This in turn will contribute to the development of new perspectives and approaches to relevant problems. T7 thus represents the archetypical critical-constructive orientation, although it is not determined by *requisite ignorance*.

The main results of this comparison can be summarised briefly by stating that all the elements of the three aforementioned typologies (roles, functions and competencies) are incorporated into, and represent and actualise different dimensions of, the six *tertius* orientations. Our discussion

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<sup>7</sup> In rhetoric, the Greek *parrhesia* is a figure of speech applied to "speaking candidly or to ask forgiveness for so speaking". There are three different forms of parrhesia. In its nominal form it is translated into English as "free speech". The verbal form, *parrhesiazomai*, stands for the use of parrhesia, while a *parrhesiastes* is a person who practices parrhesia, for example "one who speaks the truth". We refer to Fruchaud and Lorenzini (2019).



has revealed that the *tertius* typology incorporates both a relational-processual and an actual-virtual dimension of becoming. We have also documented that all of the *tertius* orientations serve simultaneously as parts of the processes linked to “spacing for newness” and are situated in a process-philosophical understanding of creation, very much like the entrepreneuring perspective presented earlier in this paper.

In conclusion, we find that the *tertius* typology mirrors both the innovation-intermediation and entrepreneuring perspectives, and we have succeeded in placing them within a new theoretical framework, regarding them as a coherent and holistic development within organisation-creation.

#### *4.2 Innovation-intermediation as entrepreneuring: a complementary analytical perspective in business development research*

Obstfeld’s model gives meaning to the concept of *tertius*, and this present work has developed the concept into a typology that has its equivalent in action archetypes. These archetypes describe different ways of driving the entrepreneuring process forward. The process of intermediation occurs at an early stage of entrepreneuring, even before we can talk about organisation. It serves to assemble the people and resources required to clear a path for actualising what is virtually new. Assembling represents a proto-organisational phase that makes organisation-creation possible. Intermediation creates opportunities for organisation-creation and offers of new value. The contribution of this paper can thus be framed as utilising the concept of *tertius iungans* to refine our capacity to conceive of and study entrepreneurship as a process.

Our theoretical approach represents an effort to link intermediation and organisation-creation to the process by which individual businesses and business networks boost their entrepreneurial capacity and ability to innovate. This is why we focus on the “how” and the concept of “becoming” as they relate to entrepreneuring, and specifically on how a new organisation achieves being (Hjorth, 2014b). The concepts of innovation-intermediation (Howells, 2006) and entrepreneuring (Hjorth, 2012; 2014a; 2014b) are seen as two intimately related ways of theorising the process of organisation-creation. Such concepts contribute to theories that seek to understand how innovation processes within individual businesses and business networks can be enhanced and optimally implemented. In this perspective, organisation-creation involves a form of intermediation or brokerage that is possibly best described as “entre-entrepreneurship”, which is entrepreneurship operating on a relational level, mediating interactions with the aim of boosting innovation. We recognise this role and function, involving intermediation that constructively capitalises on productive vagueness or ambiguity, in Steyaert’s (2014: 555) elaboration of Michel Serres’ description of creativity as daring to step aside and create space: “Instead of holding on to interests and positions, Serres holds, creative living is dependent on those who, in their everyday life, dare to step aside and create space for whatever (new and different) is to come, and thus initiate a process.”

Hjorth (2005) talks about the necessity of creating heterotopias (see Foucault, 1984) or spaces for play in businesses to promote the emergence of newness. Heterotopias are described by Hjorth

(ibid.: 392) as the creative movement of spacing: "...an event that creates and expands the cracks in the official version (a discursive formation, e.g., an administrative pattern and style of a company's management thinking and practice)." In Hjorth's thinking, heterotopias represent the "in-betweens" or spaces where, as is the case with playgrounds, newness is incipient because the world is simply there and can thus be made worthy of, or ready for, "playful becoming". Intermediation happens in this "third space", or temporary in-between heterotopia, where productive ambiguity can boost the potential inherent in events linked to organisation-creation, which are essentially the processes of entrepreneurship. Thus, what we mean by entre-entrepreneurship is the process of creating the space for entrepreneurship to happen. This creation of space by intermediation is in itself an entrepreneurial process that in turn makes entrepreneurship possible. Entre-entrepreneurship, which encompasses entrepreneurship processes that specialize in making space for entrepreneurship, is thus a kind of "meta-entrepreneurship". Our argument is that this intermediation process is analysed more precisely by utilising the concepts of *tertius iungens* and entrepreneuring.

Hjorth et al. (2018) describe openness and heterogeneity (diversity) as key prerequisites if new thinking and ideas are to emerge and mobilise without constraint. Creative thinking performed in new and alternative ways requires the establishment of new relationships using either existing or new concepts. This idea is like the "in-between" spaces described in the condescendence metaphor of Kirkeby (2005) and applied to embeddedness. Hjorth et al. (2018: 157) explain the importance of these in-between spaces by saying that "in-betweens mean opportunities can be created in openings and gaps. You can deal with gaps by imposing a template, picked from practice and or habit, and in this way cement over the crack, or you can relate to it affirmatively by bending open the crack, to move into the open and embrace playing."

There always exists an immanent potential for creation because our actualised reality is the result of selection and differentiation. Other virtualities could have been actualised, but contextual politics, practical restrictions and the nature of common sense in a cultural context, all contribute towards the specific selection and differentiation required for actualising the virtual that remains. The currently dominant approach among individual businesses and the networks within which they operate is the legitimising of development strategies designed to enhance competitiveness and boost capacity for value creation. The immanent potentials for organisation-creation processes that we are aiming to understand are enacted relationally. They belong in the in-between spaces where intermediation can make a difference. Our capacities to co-create these in-between spaces may vary, depending on a businesses or a network's exposure to influence from outside and its ability to influence others. Organisation-creation relies on mobilising a desire for a joint actualisation of a virtuality in the form of visions, ideas and images, and a capacity to work passionately to achieve this actualisation. Hjorth (2012: 116) expressed this as follows: "Entrepreneuring is thus thought as a two-phased creation: (1) channelling desire [...] putting desire into play by intensifying images of the virtual, what could become actualised; (2) but also an affirmation of the investment in creation, desire turned into an interest [...]" The first move is the time of emergence, of organisation-creation, of multiplicity and becoming of a new order, the second is one of interest/organisation.

If an intermediary is to make the world worthy of an event such as a heterotopic opening by which organisation-creation can take place, he or she must offer a convincing story of what is to come. We learn from literature that our imaginations have the capacity to carry our experience of life beyond the limits of the present. Such a capacity is crucial to opening Hjorth's "cracks" in the established reality and to bringing forth alternative and different ways of seeing, understanding, and doing.

"In entrepreneurship this would mean that the 'virtually real' (the idea of the new) is provided with ways of actualisation by this fabulating (foreign language) function: this is how 'pastness' opens up onto a future but without a present to speak of, and how organisation-creation thus becomes entrepreneurially necessary" (ibid.: 116.).

This implies, in line with Hjorth, Holt and Steyaert (2015), that a processual appreciation by process agents of entrepreneurial phenomena requires them to embrace process thinking. Entrepreneurship becomes organisation-creation not primarily by means of the creation of firms, but by the process of "firm-ing". "Entrepreneurship is a force that brings action to the virtual fringe of things, wills the new and makes potentiality leak into the actual. This is a will to joy, and increased capacity to act that affirms newness" (Hjorth, 2014b: 55).

The six-fold *tertius* typology presented in this paper encompasses both intermediation and organisation-creation (entrepreneurial). We regard these phenomena as both "co-herent and co-dependent", even though they are seen traditionally as focusing on different strategies, actions and goals in the process of business development.

## 5. Contribution and conclusion

This paper outlines and discusses a coherent framework for the development of networking and networked businesses and explores how entrepreneurial and innovation-intermediation can be seen as complementary analytical perspectives in business development and research. An empirical analysis of the practices of embedded NEs in Mid-Norway reveals two main intermediation strategies. The first involves a relation-based incubation process of organisation-creation and organisational development in individual businesses and business networks, and the second a network-based incubation process (Sletterød and Carlsson, 2014) involving the development of co-dependent and co-emergent social links both within businesses and the networks in which they operate. The results indicate that creativity is primarily the result of what happens in the spaces between people, and that organisation-creation in terms of intermediation is an entrepreneurial process that takes place both within businesses and business networks, generated by people who are bound to a variety of socio-structural contexts and different forms of relational embeddedness.

The paper emphasises that intermediation is an entrepreneurial process that clears the way for what we call "entrepreneurial". Intermediation thus has two entrepreneurial functions. Firstly, it constitutes part of the early stage of the organisation-creation process, the so-called "assembling"

phase, which exists before there is an organisation. In this sense, intermediation can be understood as a process that brings organisation-creation to maturity. It is the *hors d'oeuvre* in anticipation of the main course. It is entrepreneurship that assembles people and resources so that organisation-creation, with its offers of value, can begin. Secondly, intermediation can be understood as having a “meta- or entre-entrepreneurship” function in that it also “creates space” for entrepreneurship to happen. It is this space creation function that renders organisation-creation incipient at network level.

Our main conclusion is that our *tertius* orientation typology for NEs, combined with processual entrepreneurship theory, represents a creative theoretical and analytical tool for framing the power of innovation-intermediation and entrepreneuring to address the multilayered embedded practices involved in organisation-creation. It opens a window of opportunity for the construction of an alternative theoretical framework for our understanding of how firms can boost their embedded innovation capacity by engaging in organisation-creation based on a different understanding of embeddedness. This will entail strategies for “becoming” and “creating newness”, enabled by opening so-called heterotopias, or spaces for play, where organisation-creation is rendered incipient with new value creation as the outcome. Creators of organisations can work either from the inside, by assembling people and resources as part of the organisation and its current embedded reality, or from the outside, by meta-/entre-entrepreneurship, as an external partner unconstrained by contextual embeddedness that obstructs their vision of otherness and appreciation of newness of thought, becoming and action to emerge.

Organisation creators and developers can be regarded as having an internal (manager-employee) component on the one hand, and a set of external influences represented by the interventions and services provided by innovation intermediaries and entrepreneuring consultants on the other. It is important to point out that in both cases, change in the form of newness and alternative ways of “becoming”, can arise from the actualised or envisioned and imagined challenges of the actual (virtualities intensified in transcendent images of what might become). In the first instance, our aim is to create space for newness (spacing), which involves creating opportunities and a “freedom to become”. The second aspect involves the creation of newness involving other-worldly heterotopias, or discursive spaces that can be perceived as disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory or transforming. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds. They both disrupt and exploit what is contested. In both instances, a new organisation achieves being regardless of its current context of NE embeddedness. The conclusion from this study is that such entrepreneurial intermediation is a question of collective effort. As Schumpeter has pointed out (1949), the entrepreneurial function is a collective achievement.

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