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Elena Ponzoni and Kees Boersma
Management & Organizational History 2011 6: 123
DOI: 10.1177/1744935910364050

MANAGEMENT & ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY Vol 6(2): 123–143
DOI: 10.1177/1744935910364050

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Writing history for business: The development of business history between 'old' and 'new' production of knowledge

Elena Ponzoni VU University Amsterdam

Kees Boersma VU University Amsterdam

Abstract

This article focuses on the recent developments in business history as an academic discipline. Recently, the strategies used by commissioned, academic researchers are to make corporate history an institutional form of knowledge production. Corporate history is the more narrowed, often commissioned, brand of business history. Whereas in the past the commissioned activities of the business historians were looked down upon, with the increasing pressure towards valorization of knowledge, their work is connected with the importance of contract research from within the university. In this paper we use the actor network approach to show how *the book* – the most important output of the business historian – plays a role in the recognition of business history as a academic discipline. Throughout the article, the business history of the Royal Dutch Shell is used as an illustration.

Key words • boundary object • commissioned research • corporate history • knowledge production • the book • valorization narrative

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the recent developments in business history as an academic discipline.[1] Business history is nowadays a flourishing branch of historical faculties being developed in primary academic research programs and curricula. It has become a well-established discipline of which the many international associations, like the European Business History Association (EBHA) and the Business History Conference (BHC), and the many international journals like Business History, Enterprise and Society, and Business History Review are strong indicators. The Oxford Handbook of Business History, edited by Geoffrey Jones and Jonathan Zeitlin (2008) offers a bright overview of the field.

Business history has been positioned mostly as a sub-discipline of economic history (e.g. Corley 1993). The dominance of economic approach in business history, however, is not without its critics. Rowlinson and Procter (1999) plea for a more organizational cultural, 'postmodern' approach in business history. According to them, the dominance of economics in business history easily can lead to an economics approach to history having little attention for more narrative styles. Only recently, business historians are willing to accept alternative approaches to overcome the dominance of the economic approach (Rowlinson 2009). Arguably, the debate about the use of a variety of theories and approaches indicates that business history as a scientific discipline is strong but still struggling with its identity.

Business history has become a prolific research area in the past 20 years also in the Netherlands (for a comprehensive overview see: Sluyterman 2005). In the last few decades, various history research institutes at different universities in the Netherlands have bestowed part of their research capability to contract researches. The most diverse kinds of institutions, companies and organizations commission projects of historical research at Dutch universities or other public research institutes. Strikingly a substantial part of Dutch business history can be seen as corporate history.

Corporate history, in this respect, can be defined as a specific branch of business history that is, in a way, a more narrowed, focused 'genre' of business history (Delahaye et al. 2009). Although corporate history is flourishing within academic circles, it developed out of a demand from companies and still has as strong tradition in 'third stream' research.[2] As such, it constitutes an important portion of commissioned research at history departments as part of a broader development in the academic world. Recent debates on the organization of Higher Education show an increasing enchainment in market laws and profit goals of commercial enterprises (e.g. Clark 2001) of academic knowledge production.

However, business history, with the focus on the organizational institution, is more than just the study of a single corporate body (Booth and Rowlinson 2006; Delahaye et al. 2009). Being usually financed by private sources, *corporate history* is produced by freelance researchers and consultants (Carson and Carson 2003) as well as by researchers within university department.

In this article, our focus will be on the strategies used by commissioned researchers to make corporate history (and thus contract research) an institutional form of knowledge production. Our central question is how – in the Dutch context – corporate history arises as an institutional branch of academic history. Two sub-questions are central to our investigation. First, we will concentrate on the way business historians construct commissioned research as a legitimate form of scientific work by combining different sense-making narratives. We will focus on the academic debate on commissioned (historical) research and on developments in the system of knowledge production that are changing the public image of commissioned research, and look at the role these play in the practices and discourses of business historians. Second, we will analyse the way business historians manage connections between different social fields and reconcile different interests with their activity.

This article will concentrate on contract research within academic history departments. In particular, the Onderzoeksinstituut voor Geschiedenis en Cultuur (Research institute for history and culture: OGC) at the University of Utrecht will be used as a major example in our investigation into the discourse concerning commissioned, corporate history. The OGC is one of the more prominent academic institutes for business history, where most of (academic) historical contract research in the Netherlands is done. It has a large department for contract research where the prolific stream of externally financed researches carried out by historians is managed by two experienced coordinators, both historians. For what concerns business history in particular, the OGC is presently the most important research institute in the country. Contract research activities, commissioned historical work leading to corporate histories, are clearly profiled in the image of the OGC, being presented to the public as a special expertise of the institute.

Moreover, the OGC has lately gained international attention for what is considered as one of the greatest achievements in commissioned corporate history: the *History of Royal Dutch Shell* written by Jan Luiten van Zanden, Joost Jonker, Stephen Howarth and Keetie Sluyterman in 2007 (referred to in the reference list as Van Zanden et al. 2007), financed by the petrol magnate. The result, an elegantly designed, colossal book in four volumes,[3] was published in July 2007. The authors of this work may be seen as prominent actors in the field of business history at the moment. The large attention received from the press and from peers makes this project a good start for our investigations. It is not our intention, however, to make a critical, scholarly review of the book itself. Instead we want to reflect upon the most important *end-product* of the business historians – the book – as part of a broader debate in the field of business history, social studies of science and organization studies with regard to commissioned work.

2. Methodology and Research Methods

The theory we build upon is – in conjunction with the literature from the field of Organization Studies and studies into Higher Education – the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK). At the heart of this theory is the idea that scientific knowledge can be an object of sociological study just as any other area of culture (Bloor 1975). Central to this approach is the idea that meaning (of sentences, objects, facts, scientific theories) arises only within relations. From this perspective, (scientific) knowledge can be viewed as developing through a network of connections between different actors, through which objects, theories, concepts, instruments etc. flow. This aspect is developed mainly in Bruno Latour's approach, the 'Actor Network Theory' (ANT) (Latour 2005). This theory recently also got attention in the field of Organization Studies (e.g. Czarniawska and Hernes 2005).

Latour, in developing the ANT, describes how actors, in order to construct and maintain truth statements have to build strong chains of relations and durable alliances with other parties supporting their goals, within the scientific sphere, but also outside of it (for instance in the political sphere, in the world of business, industrial production or media). In their effort to construct objects of scientific inquiry like instruments, fix theories, develop technological tools, establish standards and research methods, etc. scientists *enrol* other actors in the struggle, turning them into allies that support the connections they need (Latour 1987,103–32). In order to enrol other actors, the scientist must first channel their interests. This can be done, for instance, through what in the field of SSK are called *translations of interest* (Callon and Law 1982): strategic 'shifts' in which interests are re-interpreted (*transformed*) so that one's own interests become strongly linked to interests of others. Translations of interest are thus ways to order the social world in such a way that (if the transformation is successful) other actors will support one's own endeavour in the effort to attain their own goals, thus become allies.

In the following, special attention will be given to the use of special tools, such as *boundary objects* (Star and Griesemer 1989), which are used by business historians to reconcile meanings and perspectives from different social worlds (that of business and that of academic research). The concept of boundary object has become an influential analytical tool in organization and management studies as well as in the field of science and technology studies (Zeiss and Groenewegen 2009). The concept will be helpful in this article to show how the worlds of business and of academic history cooperate in the creation of a business history *book* (as the History of Shell). The analysis of material artefacts, like documents, papers and books can be useful for the understanding of how and organization or institute actually works (an example here is Harper [1998], who studied the IMF by analysing its documents). Star and Griesemer (1989) explored in detail how actors from different social worlds are made to cooperate for one goal, while giving different meanings to the same objects (or concepts, tools, abstractions, mechanisms, etc.). In their investigation on how heterogeneity and cooperation coexist in the evolution of a museum of vertebrate zoology in California, the authors introduce the concept of boundary objects, indicating objects that, having different meanings in different social worlds but at the same time maintaining a common identity, can function as a means of translation across different realms of meaning.

Essential to the ANT methodology, furthermore, is that science (in our case: standards for scientific production and types of scientific products) is not considered as a ready to hand reality, but is seen as *in action* – the researcher must look at the way scientific objects become 'black boxes' and at the controversies that are locked in those 'black boxes'. To do this thoroughly, we followed the business historians in their doings and sayings with regard to the commissioned work (in our case: the meetings with the commissioner). We used discourse analysis (Phillips and Hardy 2002) to discover the relations between the central concepts and connections that respondents made.

In studying business history as a discipline, corporate history as a special genre and the product of corporate historians (i.e. the book), we made use of various resources. First of all, in this article we build upon literature research and documentary analysis. For the purpose of analysing the normative orientations with respect to historical research within the field of history, we did a literature research on the basis of academic papers and opinion articles by historians, journalists, historians or other academics. For example, the KNAW (the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) *Guidelines for Scientific-Historical Research on Commission* was an important document in our analysis. In the second place, we conducted interviews with various business historians. Especially, research material was collected through six individual and 'formal' interviews. The respondents have been involved in the History of Royal Dutch Shell project including the former legal director of Shell. Next to this, we had many informal talks with business historians – most of them Dutch – about this topic.

Finally, additional fieldnotes were taken at two academic workshops: the first was the presentation of the History of Royal Dutch Shell at the NEHA (in Dutch the Nederlands Economisch-Historisch Archief – the Netherlands Economic History Archive) in September 2007, to a public mainly composed by academic historians. The second was the official presentation of new Guidelines for Scientific-Historical Contract research developed by a board of Dutch historians in order to provide an elementary ethical code for historians doing contract research.

3. Business History and the Production of Knowledge

In line with the ANT, we would argue that the construction of scientific facts, as well as the constitution of specific instruments, research processes, machines, standards as valid steps in the production of scientific facts is always a collective process involving different types of actors (Latour 1987). From this perspective, the constitution of the academic practice of commissioned business history as an institutional system of knowledge production can be investigated as a process involving connections between actors from different social fields. In our research we analyse the way in which these connections are supported by two different and contrasting narratives (the Standard View and the Valorization Narrative) that make sense of scientific knowledge production in different ways. The Standard View in this respect advocates the objectivity of science and the independence of the researcher as garant of his/her pursue of truth. The Valorization Narrative corresponds with the idea that scientific actions should make concrete contributions to the society at large. From our discourse analysis, the parallel use of these partly contrasting narratives appears to play a central role in the way our respondents construct an image of their work.

Having said this, it is not our intent to advocate that there are only two narratives regarding the production of knowledge (see for alternative approaches: Rip 2004). The distinction we make builds upon the recent debate about the changing role of universities and the nature and goals of knowledge production and research. This debate is about the transformation in identity from the classic 'Von Humboldt university' of the 19th century towards emancipated contemporary institutions, forged by the transformation in their functions. According to Gibbons (1998), research progressively underwent a change in context from curiosity-driven disciplinary knowledge (Von Humboldtian mode), through a phase where applied research complemented the traditional approach (which he calls Mode 1), to the contemporary phase of knowledge production in application (Mode 2) (see also Gibbons et al. 1994). Arguably, Mode 1 fits seamlessly into the standard view, whereas Mode 2 reflects the Valorization Narrative.

Mode 2, according to Gibbons et al. (1994), is knowledge production as a new set of cognitive and social practices that is emerging out of the traditional system (i.e. Mode 1). In Mode 2 knowledge production becomes application oriented, transdisciplinary and heterogeneous: it develops in different sites and in fluid/instable networks of people and organizations – including multinationals, hi-tech firms, government institutions, R & D laboratories – instead of in traditional universities with clear boundaries and framed in a clear cut pattern of disciplinary areas. Next to this, being produced 'in the context of application', Mode 2 scientific knowledge is more oriented to society; it becomes more 'socially accountable'. That implies that in Mode 2 ' … sensibility to the impact of the research is built in from the start…' (Gibbons et al. 1994, 7). This means also that the social arena that participates to the choices of relevant problems to be resolved and evaluates the quality (including relevant applications) of science is expanded so as to include social actors which are traditionally considered to be outside the system of scientific production (Nowotny et al. 2002).

The distinction made by Gibbons has been criticized of being historically inadequate (e.g. Pestre 2003; Rip 2002). Next to this Mode 2 has been criticized because it can easily lead to the imperative, meaning that the university policy will be narrowed down its research activities to the wishes of big companies (Blume and Geesink 2000; Boersma et al. 2008). It is not our ambition to elaborate on this debate. Instead, we focus on the way in which, in the context of these different views, business historians latch on simultaneously to the imputed interests of the academic community, those of the commissioners from the business world and to recent changes in the public discourse (e.g. the Mode 2 debate) on science policy.

4. The Legitimacy Debate in Business History and the Standard View

Business historians working at departments as the OGC, work (as we will see) in the context of a public discussion that questions the legitimacy of their work. The academic practice of corporate history, particularly as being commissioned research, can be seen as 'in the making', in the sense that it is presently involved in legitimating and de-legitimating processes and that it has to conquer and maintain a secure place within the area of genuine and uncontroversial scientific practices (Latour 2005, 30–4).

Business history, particularly since it is mostly carried out as commissioned (corporate) research, is an object for discussion and controversy between academic as well as in public opinion. The importance of this issue is evident when we look at opinion articles in public newspapers and in disciplinary journals. The presence and weight of this discussion can be felt also within academic history departments. This becomes evident, for instance, if we consider that a special ethical commission for the production of historical contract research has been instituted by the KNAW. This has been done on the initiative of a few historians. The commission has recently developed a set of ethical guidelines that has been signed by the most important public institutes and academic departments of history doing contract research in the Netherlands.

By analysing the discussion on business history, we can outline what we will call the 'Standard View' on historical contract research. By this we mean the set of opinions, terms and conceptual relations that have been employed in the public discussions on contract research and its legitimacy in the case of history writing on the Dutch academic/intellectual scene for the last two decades. By talking about the 'Standard View', we want to stress that this it is the conception of contract research and the problems connected with it that business-historians encounter in their academic/intellectual environment and with which they somehow have to deal, in their effort of having commissioned business history accepted as a legitimate form of knowledge production. This perspective on historical contract research reflects the (traditional) normative order of the field of academic history and especially the *explicit* values that a historian is supposed to subscribe. It does in part reproduce the values indicated by Merton who characterized the 'ethos of science' (Merton 1996) as including the following norms: Communalism, Universality, Disinterestedness, Originality and Skepticism.

One of the most important problems some scholars have with 'commissioned research' is that it is not compatible with the (Mertonian) values that are perceived to be traditional in the scientific field. In 1998, the Dutch publicist Wennekes wrote a critical article in the Dutch quality newspaper de Volkskrant in which he criticized business history as an academic discipline (Wennekes 1998). Wennekes urged for a public discussion on the fact that companies are hiring historians to write their histories. In provocative words, he states that business historians are too often prepared to accommodate their writings to the wishes of their financier, instead of behaving as integer and independent scientists in search of historical truth.[4] Since Wennekes' public charge was promptly answered by the business historian Joost Jonker (about ten years later one of the authors of the Shell book) a few weeks later (Jonker 1999), the item has gained more public attention (See for instance Mooij 2007; Von der Dunk 2007). The discussion on business history rose as a public realm, intertwined with the discussion on other areas of historical research in which contract research occurred.

The discussion is centred on the problem of whether the independence of the researcher – seen as one of the basic values of academic science – can be safeguarded adequately in the case of contract research and whether it presently is. 'Independence' is here taken to mean the absence of any form of influence that the commissioner might exert on the research and the way it is reported. The Mertonian ideal of *disinterested* science is one of the hinges on which the discussion on contract research turns (Merton 1996, 274). As soon as interests (extra-scientific interest) come into the picture of scientific production, science looses its integrity and, within this view, the scientific community should not accept its products.

The critics of contract research appeal thus most of all to the autonomy of history writing as a scientific field of practice in their critique of commissioned research. Historians defending the legitimacy of contract research in published writings – contributing to the official discussion – do so by arguing that practical conditions can guarantee the freedom of the researcher also in the case of commissioned studies. By doing so, they subscribe to the same set of values. From within the conceptual framework of the Standard View itself, they describe contract research as being not much different from first stream research (i.e. the recourses of the university). In doing so, they minimize this difference to practical arrangements that do not infringe the value of academic freedom.

In the Standard View, the relation between the researcher and the commissioner is constructed as a power-relation where interests are potentially conflicting, although not always real conflicts arise. The commissioner's power on the research lies in the financial dependence of the project on him, and may culminate in an explicit 'He who pays the piper calls the tune' – attitude taken by the commissioner in some cases. The actual exercise of power by the commissioner is seen as an *abuse* of power at loss of scientific integrity, because it is a violation of the autonomy of the scientist.

The *ideal* case of contract research is, within the framework of the Standard View, the total absence of influence by the commissioner. The commissioner should not interfere, not meddle in with the historian's work. Mooij, for instance, makes a clear contrast between the (bad) commissioner that meddles in with the writing, which according to her is not very common, and the (good) commissioner who 'keeps a decorous distance', which is her most common experience (Mooij 2007, 242).

Implicit in the discussion is a neat separation of values and interests between the world of academics and the business world to which the company that wants its history written belongs.[5] So, within this conceptual framework, it is precisely in the defence of the border between these different interests that lies the possibility of rescue of contract research as a genuine scientific form of historical research. Especially in the case of business history this separation of interest is presupposed, since the business-world is seen as having interests that are certainly not consistent with those of genuine history writing. The interests of the commissioner, which is – almost by definition – extra-scientific, is seen as a threat to the historian's right to pursue scientific truth (Von der Dunk 2007, 256). The other side of this medal is the implication that the historian's pursue of truth might in some cases damage the interest of the commissioner.

5. Valorization of Research as Institutional Narrative: An Unexpected Ally

Scholars in organizational and higher education studies have pointed out that the Standard View of the academic system is on the wane, leaving room for new modes of governance of universities, concerning both education and research. General trends in public sector reforms such as New Public Management are also visible also in universities. Governmental guidance of the formal organization of research is receding, and universities become more independent organizations, having more and more the character of self-directed corporate actors. This enhanced autonomy from governmental coordination is coupled with a stress on self-responsibility, rationality and accountability. Accountability and quality control, under the responsibility of the university management, become important features of the legitimation of research. Evaluations and audits gain a prominent place, and the university must increasingly account for its performance to external bodies. In this respect, many universities are undergoing an 'entrepreneurial turn' (Clark 2001; and for the analysis of Dutch universities, see De Boer et al. 2007).

Interestingly, these developments have changed the position of business historians dramatically. While the new modes of governance of universities are often criticized for limiting the professional independence of researchers, in the case of business historians these changes contribute to a process of 'emancipation'. The changes reinforce this group as a group of professionals, consolidating their position within the university and, as a consequence of this, making the business historian stronger in his relation with the commissioner.

An important reason for the change of the social position of contract researchers in history departments in this respect lies in the new mentality centred on knowledge transfer, or more precisely 'knowledge valorization' as it is called more often in the Dutch environment. The economic goals and motives in the political discourse on science and education have become even more prevalent after the European Council of 1999 in Bologna and 2000 in Lisbon where, as known, the goal of the European Union of becoming 'the most dynamic and competitive knowledge based economy in the world' was reaffirmed and set as an urgent objective, to be attained within a term of 10 years. The Valorization Narrative can then be seen as a Narrative of Change (Doolin 2003) that supports (gives meaning to) a transformative change in the large organization that is the national system of knowledge production, and in particular of the system of founding of scientific research. Departing from a top institutional level (the European Council), edited by the Dutch government so as to embody a national aim, this narrative penetrates through further editing in lower institutional layers (we see it coming back in official documents of academic institutes like NWO and KNAW), down to academic departments as the OGC. It gives meaning and legitimacy to the entrepreneurial turn within the system of knowledge production, providing a new ideal of scientific production in which cooperation and interchange with society – and in particular the corporate world – is highly valued.

While the Standard View is centred on the ideal of autonomy of the scientist and on the assumption of a neat separation between the scientific interest of the researcher at the one side and the extra-scientific interest of the commissioner at the other, within the Valorization Narrative scientists are seen first of all as working 'in service of society'. 'Society' in this context comes to have a different meaning than it has in the

Mertonian rhetoric. Merton's ideal of communalism refers to the imperative of sharing knowledge with the scientific community and to the availability of the acquired knowledge for the benefit of humanity at large. In the Narrative of Valorization, the community ('society') that is to enjoy the advantages of the largely promoted 'knowledge transfer', narrows as to define a particular political-economic community: a 'knowledge society'. That is: a national economy, or at most, European. A political-economic system behind the borders of which is a market full of competitors (other, perhaps more powerful, 'knowledge societies'). Also, the ideal of 'knowledge transfer', relates to specific actors in society (generally acting in the field of business). In this sense, the imperative of sharing scientific knowledge is taken over in a new context, which is much less in tune with Merton's communitarian ideals, because it is restricted to one particular portion of society and associated with its economical interests. Indeed, in the valorization discourse, knowledge transfer is connected with concepts as 'patent', 'intellectual property', 'entrepreneurship', which underscores the commodified nature of scientific knowledge.

Within this view, scientist as professionals and universities as institutions (with their policy) have the social duty to contribute to the economic development of the country. Moreover, scientists are explicitly seen as working within a large social field, which includes various other kinds of other social actors (companies, enterprises, associations, government). In making choices and setting priorities, the scientific community must then take into account the interests of these different parties, which in the narrative of valorization are presented as all converging into the one common goal of national economic development. A large group of social actors that were traditionally considered to be outside the scientific system are now seen as licit participants to scientific production (whether participating to the production, the choice of relevant problems or the evaluation of quality). In particular, the cooperation between academic institutes and business is highly valued – as well as their interests linked together.

Contract research falls perfectly in the ideal of cooperation between academy and society that is praised in the Valorization Narrative. In official documents articulating the (Dutch) governmental plea for more efforts towards valorization, contract research is often named as one of the central tools of the valorization program. Within this context, business history on commission – especially the corporate history aiming a historical book of a single corporation – falls into the sphere of academic practices that are seen as exemplary, because it embodies the ideal of cooperation with the world of business. In this sense, the entrepreneurial turn – and the Narrative of Valorization connected with it – contributes to the emancipation of the professional group of business historians within the university, and turns into a powerful *ally* in the constitution of corporate history as a legitimate scientific practice. In the name of valorization, universities encourage or press academic staff to bring in commissions for externally financed research. The interest of university management for third stream research opens a space, inside university departments, for units specialized in this activity, as the OGC.

It emerges from the interview data that the 'upgrading' of contract research to an important task of universities, positively affects the work-environment of the contract researchers at the OGC. University management provides all the necessary support and cooperation for the contract research activities done at departments as the OGC, as also appears from the Strategic Plan 2005–2009 of the University of Utrecht. The document clearly reflects the turn in the institutional discourse on scientific research. It also appears clearly from the document that the policy encourages academics to engage in cooperation with corporations and other private or public bodies by offering its expertise in commissioned work, so putting scientific knowledge in service of society *and* contributing to the university financial prosperity. If 20 years ago the unorthodoxy of contract research in history made it difficult for contract researchers to have their work accepted at academic departments, the Narrative of Valorization shapes a context in which their work becomes exemplary for a 'new way', which is supported by management and institutions.

6. The Conceptualization of Contract Research in the Context of Contrasting Alliances

The Narrative of Valorization has however not penetrated as deeply in the academic community as to generally shape the way academics conceptualize their work. As was stated earlier, the Standard View informs the critical discussion on the role of contract research within universities between historians and other academics. The two narratives, in many respects diametrically opposed to each other, appear to coexist in academic environments as the OGC. Investigating how business historians at the OCG legitimate their work, it appeared that the Standard View and the Narrative of Valorization both inform their legitimating strategies.

In response to criticisms by colleague historians or other academics on the practice of contract research, business historians mostly defend their work by constructing it as being in tune with the 'traditional', Mertonian values – thus from within the conceptual framework of the Standard View. The defence is mostly about the independence of the historian; the way sources (company archives) are used and analysed is rarely discussed (an exception is Hounshell who, in a journal article, reflects extensively on his role as a business historian during his work in the DuPont archives, see Hounshell 1990). By connecting to the Standard View, business historians define themselves as academics, as being part of the academic field with its specific (traditional) norms and values. This definition of the business historian as full member of the academic community is indeed not straightforward, since, as stated, the practice of business history first developed outside the borders of the academic field. The Standard View constitutes the conceptual framework of the efforts of business historians to prove their work is proper academic research. In the effort to enrol the academic community in the construction of business history as an institutional academic practice, business historians at the OCG profile themselves as boundary spanners:[6]

they describe their role as that of bridging the gap between the treasure of empirical data lying 'outside' (in the companies' archives) and the scientific work of economic historians who need data about business development in the Netherlands.

The role of business historians is thus constructed as latching on primarily to the disciplinary interests of economic history, by providing access to data that are normally inaccessible to the historian. For this access to be realized, doing research on commission of companies is considered essential. Companies would not allow access to the archives in other cases. In the legitimating strategies of business historians, the translation of interests that connects their work to the interests of economic history is thus essential. In this construction of interests, the Narrative of Valorization does not play any prominent role. The interest of the commissioner (which in the Narrative of Valorization represents the interest of society 'out there') is in this context only of secondary interests. The business historians interviewed do not stress the benefits of their work for the commissioner as primarily important, accentuating the importance of their work for the academic community.

However, from our research the business historians at the OCG appear clearly aware of the fact that the Narrative of Valorization makes their position within the university less vulnerable. Next to informing the attitude and choices of university management in the favour of contract research, this narrative also shapes a conceptual framework in which the arguments of the strong critics of historical contract research can be seen as backward and reactionary. Indeed, in some cases the interviewed business historians at the OCG also explicitly latch on to the Narrative of Valorization in legitimizing their work.

In order to flourish as a new branch of historical research, business history needs cooperation from different social worlds. Not only do hierarchical levels at the university need to be enrolled, and the scientific community of historians be convinced, but also in the world of business alliances must be built. The business historian will have to enrol commissioners ready to support them. The research shows that various aspects of the way the relation with the commissioner is managed in practice are not easily compatible with the Standard View. In making sense of these aspects, business historians latch onto the Narrative of Valorization. Therefore, in the way business historians make sense of practical aspects of their work, the two contrasting narratives exist in parallel.

7. The Book as a Boundary Object: A 'Celebration Book' with Footnotes

There are various reasons and motives for the commissioner to ask for a corporate history. Nostalgic feelings, the use of history for public relations, the celebration of past generations, criticize governmental interventions, and gain (management) knowledge from comparable processes in the past are often mentioned (Carson and Carson 2003; Coleman 1987; Delahaye et al. 2009). The promising aspect for scholars is the idea that history can inform them to develop more adequate historical theories (Kieser 1994; Stager Jacques 2006), understand the present and future of companies (Lamond 2005; Ybema 2004), understand strategies (Booth 2003), entrepreneurial behaviour (Collinson and Shaw 2001; Morrison 2001) and to understand cultural change in organizations (Rowlinson and Procter 1999).

Interestingly, it is precisely the most important product of business historians – the book – that must be taken into consideration for understanding the work of the business historian. Although under the current pressure to produce more scientific output i.e. journal articles, *the book* is still a sign of the (business) historians' status and professional skills. Of course business historians produce more than just books; they are active in international conferences, engaged in social debates and parliamentary committees and organize themselves in associations and foundations. The point here is that the book can be seen as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989; Zeiss and Groenewegen 2009) that defines the relation between academic and business historians. Since the 1960s there has been a boom in the demand for corporate histories by companies, institutes and multinationals. Having one's corporate history written at jubilees or special anniversaries has become more of a norm as part of such celebrations. Where, in the past, companies engaged historians or other writers for longer periods of time to set down the 'glorious past' of the enterprise in more or less hagiographic terms, recently historians also approach companies themselves to offer their expertise. At the OGC in Utrecht, respondents have indicated that they contact organizations which they would like to research and propose they finance the writing of the company's history.

In particular, anniversaries of interesting companies have become something the business historian should not let pass without noticing. 'Celebration books' (*a book with pictures* referred to by some as a 'coffee table book'; Delahaye et al. 2009) or memorials in occasion of jubilees are the typical form of commissioned business histories. In approaching the commissioner, however, the historian is from the start convincing him/her of the importance of having a 'serious', that is: scientific work (*a book with footnotes*). The wish of the company to have a memorial book as a way to celebrate one's jubilee is reinterpreted as a wish for scientific research. A clear authorship is important in this respect, ' ... to signify accountability and scholarship … '(Delahaye et al. 2009, 33). Historians of the OGC latch on to this imputed interest to present their work as the best a company can wish for.

If the scientific status of the study is becoming part of the symbolic capital that such a history provides for commissioners, it is still as 'celebration book' that commissioners are primarily interested in it. Business histories are generally written for the occasion of jubilees, and are for the company a way to celebrate their long existence. If in some cases, as in the case of Shell, 'illuminated' top-men show their genuine interest for academic history, for the major part of employees standing behind them and for many commissioners themselves, the important result remains the book itself – and not the scientific investigation behind it.

That means that, where on the one side the business historian has succeeded in the interest translation so far as to make authorship by an academic an important aspect of the value of the object in question, at the other side interests are not so much been translated and aligned as to be indistinguishable, and the physical, material object that is the memorial book remains an indispensable link that connects them to each other (reconciles them). The book, the physical publication as final result, is thus one crucial hinge around which the cooperation with the world of business turns. Although there are alternative forms of publishing historical date, such as at websites, in pamphlets and prospectus (Delahaye et al. 2009), most commissioners would not be enrolled onto the project, despite their interest in the history, if the result were not a book, but was for instance, a peer reviewed journal article.

Most business histories are publications with festive looks and a great amount of pictures. Sometimes, as in the Shell case, the grandeur of the company is clearly reflected in the appearance of the book, with a weight of almost ten kilograms in a deluxe cased edition, composed of four beautifully designed volumes scattered with high quality prints and photographs. The weight of the book was explicitly mentioned in various media, such as the quality Dutch newspapers *de Volkskrant* (Herderscheê and Sahadat 2007; Van Gelder 2007) and the *NCR* (Zom 2007). Even the designers and producers of the synthetic luxury cassette got a lot of attention. The cassette was a co-production between Shell, Van Dijk 3D Engineering and Doeko (Danhof 2007).

The book is a product of scientists – with all the status connected with it – which in looks celebrates the success of the company. In some contexts the adjustments to preferences of the commissioner are legitmized by deconstructing the scientific importance of the object itself (the book) and projecting the importance of academic autonomy onto other kind of objects that are or can be produced by using commissioned history as a tool. In other contexts the books are praised as high-quality academic productions. The History of Royal Dutch Shell was for instance presented to a public of peers during an academic workshop organized at the NEHA (the Netherlands Economic History Archive) in September 2007.

An interesting fact to mention of that occasion is the special effort done by one of the authors to give meaning to the outer appearance of the book from the perspective of academics. By reading reviews and from informal talks in the field one can clearly perceive that the monumentality and luxuriousity of the jubilee-edition is perceived, in the academic world, as not being in tune with the standard in academic publication.

8. Shell Serving Science and Bona Fide Scientific Research as Harmless

The case of the history of Shell, next to being positively reviewed in various journals and (Dutch) newspapers as an excellent and independent historical study on commission (e.g. by Bamberg, 2008),[7] is presented unanimously by the respondents involved in its making as what they call it ' … the perfect example of a commissioned work'. They present the History of Royal Dutch Shell as a ideal working project, thanks to the outstanding understanding between commissioner and author. It responds to an ideal of the 'perfect' commissioned research that is in a way opposite to the Standard View. On the other hand, as successful as the project might look at first glance, the result of this work was not without its critics in academic circles. Besides positive reviews (e.g. Bosscher 2007), the book certainly has its critics. The fiercest criticism, thus far, has been provided by Heller (2009) in Business History. In a extensive review essay on the book, Heller not only blames the Dutch historians of being too Dutch (neglecting the British part of Shell's history) but (and more important for our argument) also of being too corporate, saying that, ' … One is simply left when reading these volumes with the nagging suspicion that they are simply a corporate history by commissioned historians from a corporate partner university to write a celebratory history of a major corporation' (Heller 2009, 124).[8]

However, the Utrecht business historians argued that it is not the protective isolation of the researcher from the commissioner – based on the idea of a conflict of interests between the two – that was aimed at in the Shell-project, but, on the contrary, the creation of a solid trust relation between commissioner and researcher, which is fed by their cooperation in the redaction board. This board is an instrument, which is used more and more in the production of commissioned business histories in the Netherlands. It is a board including independent academics from the field (different from the authors) and representatives of the commissioning company. The board is responsible of judging the quality of the work. Generally, the redaction board has the final word on whether the manuscript is fit for publication. There is a debate going on between academics on whether the academic members of the redaction board should have more decisional power within the board than the commissioner.

The existence of a redaction board – and in particular the participation of independent academic historians in it – is often adduced as an argument to claim that the academic quality of the commissioned work is guaranteed. This argument was widely used by our respondents. In the case of the history of Shell, the redaction board was formally composed by two members of the company (including the chief executive) and two professors of business history and economic history. However, the authors generally participated in the meetings of the board, which were seen as an occasion for exchanging perspectives and cooperation with the commissioner.

The closeness and cooperation between the world of science and that of the commissioner that is embodied in the redaction board is legitimated with reference to an identification of interests between historian and commissioner. Interests are constructed to match as much as possible. This is clearly in tune with the rhetoric of the Valorization Narrative.

One of the basic ingredients for this translation of interests is the opposition between scientific research as such, and the harmfulness of data (the damage that describing the past of the company, or bringing to light unknown facts about it, can cause). This opposition was central in the account of respondents, when it came to making sense of the power-relations involved in their cooperation. Respondents often stressed, for instance, that although commissioners sometimes fear that the research will bring to light embarrassing facts, in reality the kind of happenings that the company is afraid of bringing to light are generally not interesting at all 'from an historical point of view'.

By providing the commissioner, as reader, with the right instruments to read the book by placing it in a historical context, 'unpleasant' facts often loose their negative/condemnable connotation. Historical research is constructed by business historians as *in itself not harmful*. Repeatedly, respondents stressed that a real historical-scientific question is not a normative question, but an open question about what happened. Therefore, they argue, commissioners should not be too worried, because a 'good' business history, where facts are placed in the right context and not used to place the company in a bad (or, for that matter, good) light, does not generally damage anyone's image. The conceptual framework that constitutes the background of these legitimation strategies contain clearly both the Valorization Narrative and the Standard View.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

This article makes clear that the discussion about the uses and abuses of business history (Coleman 1987) is far from over. One of the abuses already mentioned by Coleman in the late 1980s is a corporate history being ' … a mere public relations purpose in commissioning company histories … ' (Coleman 1987, 154). Business history writing is a practice that took shape in between different social fields. It emerged initially as a non-academic form of history writing, in the offices of companies hosting various kinds of writers – not constituting a specific professional group – who celebrated the history of the company in jubilee books. It started to become an academic practice together with the rise of economic history, and the consequent emergence of academic historical interest in business development. The beholding of historical data about companies became increasingly important for academic history, leading to an increase of the value of archives of companies and with them also of (commissioned) company memorials (i.e. corporate histories).

While at first most professional historians writing business histories did this on a freelance basis or from private research bureaus, recently business history is gaining more and more of an official position in academic departments – such as the OGC. Although first and second stream business history exist, the core of business historical production is still commissioned. The development of business history within the university is then connected with the increase of contract research from within the university, due to recent developments in Dutch science policy (and in the western system of knowledge production in general). On the spur of these changes, business history is becoming more and more of an academic discipline.

The *academic* practice of business history is possible through the alignment of different interests. These include that of economic historians, who bring direct empirical data from the business world which may otherwise go lost – or can never be accessed – if they are not recorded in companies' memorial books; that of the university management wanting to promote 'third stream' research and participate in the trend of knowledge valorization; that of companies wishing to have their history recorded, or wanting to go along with the trend of having representative jubilee books, but wanting to avoid the image-damage of having a history written by a non-academic writer – in the recent climate likely to fall prey to the attack of journalists; and also that of graduated historians who, in the scarcity of academic posts, look for alternative sources to be able to work as historians.

For the business historian, the university is an important ally. Working inside its walls supports his/her emancipation from the power of the commissioner and gives stability and scientific status to his work. The acceptance of business history in the academic world is however not straightforward and the business historian needs to face the controversial nature of his/her work. To keep his or her activity going and to construct it as a scientific practice, the business historian needs to enrol academic peers, the public opinion and the world of business. The academic world and public opinion must be convinced that what he/she is doing is proper academic research. This is also important in relation to the alliance with the world of business, which is based on the prestige granted by a history considered scientific, in the context of the new critical stance of public opinion towards non-scientific, self-promoting jubilee books. Moreover, the business historian has to manage the actual making of a business history, and the cooperation with the commissioning company, which is necessary to it. And he or she will have to legitimate this cooperation to the academic community and the outside world.

Business historians see themselves first of all as academics and within the academic community they construct their professional group as that of boundary spanners with a special access to economic historical data guarded by corporations. They translate the interest of peer historians (in particular economic historians) so as to construct their work as an 'obligatory passage point' as Latour (1987) would argue. This is an important step in the enrolment of the academic world. The conceptual background of this construction is the Standard View. Respondents generally present their work and their position in the academic world with reference to the values of Standard View.

However, we have also seen that the Narrative of Valorization functions as an important ally in making their work institutionally legitimate. Although respondents say they perceive the central values of this narrative as forced upon the academic world 'from above', they are aware of the fact that it supports their emancipation at the university. Also, the Narrative of Valorization is a ready framework, which can be used to make sense of the nature of the alliance with the commissioner, specifically, how it is managed and maintained in the actual practice of writing a business history. The trust relation between commissioner and researcher is an important hinge for the work of the business historian. The stress on this trust relation, on the cooperative connection between commissioner and researcher and on the common sphere of interests, is certainly in tune with the Valorization Narrative.

Notes

1. This article has been presented as a paper at the 25th EGOS Colloquium in Barcelona, 2 July 2009 in the session Historical perspectives in organization studies. We would like to thank the organizers and participants of that session for their useful remarks to the earlier version.
2. In this article, first stream research is considered as research paid by the university. Second stream research is supported by independent nation research foundations (like, in the Netherlands, the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO) and third stream research is commissioned research. In the day-to-day practice of current academic life, these three streams are more and more used as complementary resources.
3. *A History of Royal Dutch Shell* in four volumes: *Vol. I: From Challenger to joint Industry Leader, 1890–1939* (by Joost Jonker and Jan Luiten van Zanden). *Vol. II: Powering the Hydrocarbon Revolution, 1939–1973* (by Stephen Howarth and Joost Jonker). *Vol. III: Keeping Competitive in Turbulent Markets, 1973–2007* (by Keetie Sluyterman). *Vol. IV: Appendices, figures and explanations, collective bibliography and index* (by Jan Luiten van Zanden) and 3 DVDs.
4. In his article, Wennekes used the example of Dutch multinational Philips. He argued that the history of the Philips Research Department should be written by what he called 'independent researchers'. More than five years later, a large research project on the history of Philips research resulted in two books (Boersma 2002; De Vries 2005) and many articles (among others Boersma 2003; Boersma and De Vries 2008). The project was partly financed by the Philips Research Department and partly by the then Faculty of Technology Management of the Eindhoven University of Technology. It was carried out by academic researchers of the group of History of Technology at the same university (including one of the authors of this article).
5. 'Since the aims of science and of business-life are not simply in line with each other, the dependence [of the researcher on the commissioner] can lead to different forms of conditioning of the research or its results … ' (Blasing 1999, 57). 'The modern business-historian will nearly always have to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis, between the interest of the commissioner and that of science. His work is continuously accompanied by the need to weigh up when his business history stops being academic and how academic it may become before it stops being interesting for the commissioner' (Blasing 1999, 59 and compare Beekers 2007).
6. The expression 'boundary spanner' is used by scholars in organizational studies to indicate the role assumed by subjects belonging to a group or organization that control and supply the flow of information from and to the outside (see Zabusky and Barley 1997, 366). This concept is used, for instance to describe the role of industrial scientists employed in a company who, within the firm, function as connection point with the academic world and manage the flow of information from one world to the other (Zabusky and Barley 1997, 366). A similar role is claimed by business historians at the OGC, who construct their role as contract researchers within the university as that of 'gates' through which the flow of data from Dutch companies enters the world of historians.
7. In 2008, Bamberg was the Alfred D. Chandler International Visiting Scholar at the Harvard Business School. For a long time the 'official' historian of British Petroleum (BP) and author of several books on the history of BP (e.g. Bamberg 1994).
8. Again, it is not the aim of this article to argue about the quality of the book (nor to reflect upon the fairness of the reviews), but to investigate how the discourse about corporate (commissioned) history unfolds in this project. In this respect, it is interesting that Heller, in positioning the authors' effort, presents the book as an actor, arguing that ' ... this history does not seem to know who or what it is – coffee table corporate PR, more to be looked at that read, or a serious piece of business history, which deals with its subject in an academic and critical fashion.' (Heller 2009, 124). Here Heller is ambiguous about the question if [how] a corporate history that meets the 'academic and critical fashion' can be the outcome of commissioned research at the same time.

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Elena Ponzoni [e.ponzoni@fsw.vu.nl]) is currently working as a researcher at the Department of Governance Studies and at the Department Culture, Organization and Management of the Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University Amsterdam. She graduated in Philosophy (Universita' degli Studi of Milan and University of Amsterdam) and in Culture, Organization and Management (VU University Amsterdam). Her work is situated in the fields of Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of Language, Sociology of Science and Management of Diversity and Integration.

Kees Boersma [fk.boersma@fsw.vu.nl] is Associate Professor at the VU University Amsterdam in the department of Culture, Organization and Management. His research interest is in 'science and technology studies', 'business history and history of technology', and in 'organization, culture and power'. He published widely on R&D history, organizational learning, and organizational culture. His publications appeared amongst others in journals as *Enterprise and Society*, *Business History*, *Human Relations* and *Tertiary Education and Management*. He is teacher in the courses Organizational Behavior, Organizational Politics and Technology and Culture.