**Power Gaps and Interdependencies in Business Model Actvity Systems: The Case of Cyberlibris**

Dr Amira Laifi

[address and contact details]

Dr Lorraine Warren

Director, Centre for Strategic Innovation

School of Management

University of Southampton

Highfield

Southampton SO17 1BJ

Tel: 02380598972

Email: lw4@soton.ac.uk

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**Objectives**

This article examines the power relationships that have unfolded during interactions between interdependent actors during business development for the case of a digital library company, Cyberlibris. It highlights the importance of power gaps during business model (BM) development that impact on overall value creation

**Prior Work**

Value creation transcends business frontiers (Amit and Zott 2001-2010;Dyer and Singh, 1998; Chesbrough, 2003). Taking a broader 'activity system' view (Amit and Zott) brings actor independencies and interactions to the foreground of our understanding of BM development. This study extends this work by focussing particularly on the power gaps that unfold through resource interdependencies during the BM development in the Cyberlibris case.

**Approach**

The case study approach is used, comprising primary data (40 interviews) and secondary data (documentary analysis). Underpinned by the resource based view, the analysis charts the interdependencies in the BM activity system and goes on to identify and discuss power gaps (and their implications).

**Results**

The paper highlights the power gaps between different actors in the BM activity system, and shows how those power gaps impact on value creation and the development of the BM over time. This study shows that value creation depends on the power gaps between focal firm and business actors of its BM. The study suggests that a considerable power gap between actors might hinder value creation overall, and highlights the importance of not just material or economic resources, but also symbolic resources, particularly legitimacy.

**Implications**

Bringing the resource-based view to examine interdependencies in BM activity systems highlights the need to take a less reductive view of BM development that accounts for power gaps in relationships and different understandings of value.

**Value**

Generally, the work contributes to the literature on business model development and value creation, more specifically to a more critical strand that challenges the notion of entrepreneurship as merely an instrument of economic rationality. At a high level, the work has value for policy makers, as business model development becomes increasingly central in many new areas of organisational life as new ways of organising emerge in relation to financial constraints.

**Key words**

Business model (BM), activity system, resources and competencies, interdependencies, power gap, value creation.

**Introduction**

The term ‘business model (BM)’ has been used in many ways in the business and management literature, drawing on many theoretical and conceptual approaches (Zott et al. 2011; Camisón & Villar-López 2010; Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart 2010). These range from quite simple expressions of how a firm will make money ((Stewart & Zhao 2000, p.290), through to far more powerful understandings that attempt to capture the full range of stakeholder relationships necessary to firm prosperity. In these wider conceptualisations, the BM is, at heart, an integrating model that can explain value creation through different theories. (Zott and Amit, 2009).

In the context of value creation, authors have examined the manner in which BMs affect firm capacities to create and catch value, many works drawing on the boundary-less nature of BMs. Different perspectives include value chain analysis, innovation theory, transaction cost theory, resource based view and strategic process approaches (Amit and Zott, 2001). Some studies stress industrial organization, resource based view and strategic process perspectives to explain how information and communication technologies create value (Timmers, 1999; Hedman and Kalling, 2002). Other authors such as Chesbrough and Rosenbloom (2002) and Chesbrough (2006) highlight open BM capacities in relation to the potential to create value. Transaction cost theoristsemphasise structural and behavioural interactions (Tapscott and *al*. 2000; Amit and Zott, 2001; Tapscott, 2001; Zott and Amit, 2009).

While debates continue, we follow the broad-based view of BM development focusing our paper on the interactions between business actors and their impact in BM value creation. We begin by highlighting the systemic approach to BM development which stresses the importance of the inter-firms activity system in the value creation process. Then, the resource dependence theory is introduced, as a basis for analyzing the relationships between a focal firm and the business actors of its BM. We then introduce the case study of Cyberlibris, a digital library subscription service, identifying the interdependencies that make up the BM activity system. Specifically, relationships are analysed from a power gap point of view, reflecting constructs of normative and utilitarian power (Etzioni, 1964). Conclusions and direction for further study follow.

**BM: a systemic approach**

The BM is a network of business actors that create value (Alt and Zimmerman, 2001). The BM creates value by exploiting business opportunities. Academic authors agree that the BM articulates multiple concepts around the creation of value (Zott and *al*. 2010). The BM could be considered as an articulation of the activity system that firms use to create value for one or many market segments, with an ultimate goal that is generating a flow of sustainable revenues (Dubosson-Torbay and al. 2002; Teece, 2010). It could be argued therefore that the activity system is the key to understanding the BM of a firm, as it embraces the engagement of the human, material and financial resources that are brought to bear by the focal firm and other actors who aim to reach specific goals (Zott and Amit, 2009: 5).

The concept of a system is useful in that it specifies the unconventional boundaries delineated by technical, technological, cost, innovation and risk factors. It draws attention to the “*boundary spanning*” nature of BM (Zott and Amit, 2010: 219). Zott and Amit stress the fact that organizations need to make connections with different business actors. Those connections permit a focal organization to rely on the resources and the capacities of third parties and allow it to capture external ideas and technologies. The concept of system also refers to an exchange relationship that is dealing less with the product than with the value created through a combination of pertinent resources and capacity. So the system is a set of elements interacting with each other that permits in the end, the pivot firm to propose an offer and to create a value (Zott and Amit, 2010).

An activity system is a set of interdependent activities which require the commitment of the firm, its partners, suppliers, customers, investors, collaborators, etc. An activity system is a coalescence and interest constellation, chosen by the focal firm to create value and generate revenues. It is a business environment in which an organization coevolves with selected organizations and individuals which can create the BM (Voelpel and *al*., 2005). It allows access to resources and capacities needed to exploit the opportunities of the market and to develop and propose a value. In the same logic, other authors such as McGrath (2010) and Zott and *al*. (2010) highlight the ability of such systems to bring up the resources required to configure or reconfigure a BM, which raises the question of interdependencies.

Through the prism of an activity system, a BM describes the roles of different actors and the relationships that can exist between the firm, distributors, customers, allies, investors, etc. It permits the identification of the main product, information and money flow and determines the benefits of the business actors (Weil and Vitale, 2001). As a consequence the definition of BM leads to localizing the focal enterprise within a network of partners (Osterwalder and *al*. 2005). Hence, in order to better understand the BM concept, it is necessary to understand the system in which the firm is situated and to highlight the interdependencies engendered by the resources engaged by the business actors (Amit and Zott, 2001). Interdependencies between business actors are thus at the core of the concept of the BM.

**Why resource dependence theory?**

This paper is focused on the relationships and interactions between the focal firm and different business actors as well as their impact on and their role in the value creation and BM evolution. The studying of such organizational links cannot be achieved without circumscribing them in a dynamic perspective. So it is crucial to consider the reasons for the establishment of such ties between organizations, their nature and their consequences. These concerns are at the core of the resource dependency theory which is the theoretical approach applied in this work.

Evolving in an interdependent environment, actors cannot entirely control individually all the conditions required for the accomplishment of certain actions and their desired consequences (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978: 40). However, if organizations are joined by a system of mutual support, they can create a shared area in which they could sustain a control over their destiny (Michael, 1973). An organization must attract external support that is crucial to its survival. It has to obtain the trust of key actors for a particular activity or policy. Those actors would permit the stabilization of the management of the organizations and their existence (Thompson, 1967). Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) presume that no enterprise is under its own control. Whatever its wealth may be, an organization is somewhere dependent on the external factors that are associated with the acquisition and use of external resources. The organizations are therefore faced with a dependency on resources that can be diverted by others (Fombrun and Astley, 1983). They must import resources from their environment. Their survival and growth depend on this. This signifies that an organization should not only have and acquire resources but should also be able to access to external ones that are brought by different actors. The organization therefore attempts to associate certain actors with its projects. Allies of an organization or a project determine its access to resources without which organization survival and durability are threatened. Any loss of backing provided to an organization by its social network can be blamed on an increasingly restricted access to resources. Threats of resource flow break are as significant as the social network which brings support to organization as its pool of resources as well (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

As a consequence, obtaining resources, essentially complementary ones, is one motor of the collaboration between organizations (Dussauge and *al*, 2000; Van de Ven and Walker, 1984). Firms cooperate with each other, make connections and are involved in partnerships in order to access resources that they do not have currently and cannot achieve by other means. These resources may be tangible, such as technologies and financial resources. They can also include less tangible resources such as relational resources, reputational resources and legitimacy (Dwyer et al, 1987). According to an instrumental logic, the neo institutional approach considers legitimacy as a resource that firm had to acquire competitively from its environment, and thus allows access to further advantage. Consideration of both tangible and intangible resources needs to take place in our case study of interactions and interdependencies between the focal firm and the business actors which constitute its activity system.

Of course, an approach based on resource dependency raises the issue of power gaps and inequalities in those relationships and interdependencies (Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), Pfeffer (1981) Burt (1983), Courpasson and Golsorkhi, 2009). Emerson (1962) models the power of an actor i on an actor j as a negative function of the dependence of i on j. The dependence of i on j is determined by the critical character of the resources held by j that are required by i, and by the existence of alternative suppliers of this key resources. In the core of the theory of power the discretionary control concept figures largely. This is closely tied to resource dependency. ‘‘*Power is the capacity premised on resource control … the cause of power is resource dependency*’’ (Clegg, 1989: 99). The more i needs j’s resources, the more the dependence of i on j is high. Yet the more alternative key resource suppliers there are, the lower the dependence is, and vice versa. According to Lawler and Yoon (1996) the identification of an imbalance of power – or a power gap -- requires the examination of mutual dependence between actors. Casciaro and Piskorski (2005), underline the mutual dependency as a significant element to consider in the analysis of the power within inter-organizational relationships. Thus, to understand an imbalance of power between i and j, it is not sufficient to examine the dependence of i on j, the dependence of j on i should be examined as well.

Etzioni (1964) identifies three categories of power: coercive, utilitarian and normative, underlining the close connection between the nature of resources and the type of power. Coercive power is based on physical resources such as force, violence or restriction; utilitarian power is based on material and financial power and normative power is based on symbolic and normative resources such as esteem and prestige. Etzioni’s definition therefore provides a useful analytical construct to examine the interdependencies that arise during the creation and development of a BM (material or financial strengths of actors, relational assets, reputation, authority and institutional resources).

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper studies the case of Cyberlibris, a digital library created in 2003 that offers business schools (mainly) a tailored package of digital books accessible online which has a BM constructed around a digital library. In brief, Business Schools take out a subscription, after which, the digital library gives an unlimited time, space and user access. We take a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, as this enables a more subtle, richer understanding of how the interdependences between Cyberlibris and key actors such as technological partners, investors, business schools, publishers, are played out during Cyberlibris’s value creation processes. Therefore, this qualitative study is based on secondary data (document/internet search) and 40 interviews with participants in the Cyberlibris activity system and with the managers of the digital library. The interviews were carried out between 2006 and 2010. The analysis used Etzioni’s (1964) constructs of utilitarian and normative power, and was focused on the interdependencies between the focal firm and the business actors of its activity system, the imbalances between the actors and their impacts on the BM construction and overall value creation.

**THE CASE OF CYBERLIBRIS**

The revenue model of Cyberlibris BM is, essentially, based on business schools and universities. It is a rental model which relies on relationships between student numbers and subjects as a basis on which to fix prices and create revenues. The subscriptions, which are annual, of some business schools can reach 60 thousand Euros.

The figure below presents Cyberlibris revenue distribution.

**Figure 1: The BM revenues distribution**

Cyberlibris turn over (TO):

Subscriptions paid by business schools

Publisher Revenues (PR)

TO.50%

Cyberlibris revenues:

TO.50%

Publisher1 (8% of consultations)

PR1: PR.8%

Publisher2 (10% of consultations)

PR2: PR.10%

…

Publisher n (17% of consultations)

PRn: PR.17%

Author Revenues (AR):

PRn.8%

Revenues cached by

Publisher n:

REN.92%

Author1 (4% of consultations)

AR1: AR.4%

Author 2 (6.5% of consultations)

AR2: AR.6.5%

…

Author n (21% of consultations)

AR n: AR.21%

Cyberlibris is a very small organization where people (about 10) are the principal internal resource. The Cyberlibris team is composed of several people.[[1]](#footnote-1) Eric Briys, the founder of Cyberlibris, spent fifteen years as an academic in prestigious business schools. After that, he worked in the finance and insurance field. François Lascaux, who is the co-founder and senioer manager of Cyberlibris, worked in senior marketing and export roles in a firm in the tobacco industry. Christine Jeannet, who is responsible for the academic market, was a manager at Lehman Brother London for five years. The other members of the Cyberlibris team are people whose competencies are based on the web, web marketing, and website creation and design.

Aside from the members of Cyberlibris, the resources and competencies of the Cyberlibris BM are external to the organization. These resources include books and financial resources and also technological resources and competencies, as the BM of Cyberlibris has arisen from developments in the expansion of the internet. Certain partnerships and collaborations are particularly relevant to the Cyberlibris BM:

* An ebrary portal - Cyberlibris have taken out a license with ebrary that permits the use and distribution of its digital content online.. Ebrary is the platform that provides Cyberlibris with the technology and the content that permits it to create its own platform, and archive and manage its own digital content through a personalized interface. This unique interface allows users to access the contents of the digital library anywhere and anytime. The technology provided by ebrary (underpinned by Adobe) provides significant user functionality: search tools, annotation (underlining, marginal notes, copy/paste, printing, saving underlined and marginal notes for example. Also, ebrary permits user interactivity with the Cyberlibris platform, as well as with other readers.
* Groupe Monceau – who provide financial investment
* Publishers – who allow access to copyrighted materials
* Researchers and consultants – who advise on the configuration of the technical development
* Librarians – who advise and integrate material into existing learning resource systems
* Business Schools – the source of revenue, but also by association, legitimacy and reputation.

This figure presents the resources and competencies of the BM activity system.

**Figure 2: Cyberlibris activity system**

**Human resources** (internal competencies)

Cyberlibris co-creator :

Relational resources & professional experiences

Professional experiences of Cyberlibris team:

Top management, marketing, web design,

development of web solution

Financial resources

Books: intellectual property

Technological resources and competencies

Relational resources

Specialized scientific knowledge

Symbolic resources: legitimacy

Publishers

Groupe Monceau

eBrary

Adobe

Business schools

Euromed Marseille, HEC paris, Black&wiley …

Researchers and consultants

Librarians

**interdependencies and power gaps between Cyberlibris and its key business actors in the bm**

**ANALYSIS OF POWER GAPS**

During analysis of these interdependencies, using Etzioni’s constructs, it is possible to identify utilitarian and normative power gaps. It is easy to ascertain that some interdependencies are far more significant than others, as discussed below.

**Trivial utilitarian power gaps**

The interactions between Cyberlibris and the technological consultants and scientific researchers are brief. They result in a continuous improvement of the technical offer configuration which progressively engages the clients who, little by little, appreciate this aspect of the offer. There is a one-way dependence, yet the access to these competences, that are available in the market, is not limited, and the power gap is inconsequential.

**Moderate utilitarian power gaps**

More significant utilitarian power gaps were identified between Cyberlibris and their technological partners ebrary, and their financial partners, groupe monceau. The dependencies were significant, and concentrated on technological and financial resources:

* With technological partners

In 2003 the digital library became operational because of the partnership between Cyberlibris and ebrary. Cyberlibris creators had had to wait two years to move their idea to its concretization due to technical issues that were eventually solved by ebrary. Cyberlibris is still depended on ebrary, as they have not found alternative solutions or suppliers. In addition, the dependence is not mutual. Although this power gap is noteworthy, the asymmetry is balanced to some extent by a partnership managed by a legal contract.

* With investors: groupe monceau

The digital field needs considerable investment. To launch Cyberlibris, managers needed substantial capital that was provided by a leading insurance group: the groupe Monceau. The high dependence of Cyberlibris on its principal stakeholder is balanced by the personal relationships between Cyberlibris managers and Group Monceau managers. Eric Briys’ personal relationships permit him to access the financial resources and moderate Cyberlibris dependence on its primary investor.

**Business schools: A substantial normative and utilitarian power gap**

Business schools and universities constitute the main revenue source of Cyberlibris BM. Moreover, the revenue flows that are determined by the number of customers and the renewal of subscriptions determine publisher agreements with Cyberlibris BM. This is a complex set of interdependencies. Publishers were reluctant to engage with the digital library for more than five years due to the low levels of revenue flows, which in turn engenders the business school refusal of the digital library. This power gap is significant because the Cyberlibris BM evolves in a two sided market in which positive externalities are a business success key. In other words, the success of the digital library is determined by the number of customers that it attracts. The more the BM attracts costumers the more new ones stick to the activity system. And the more the BM attracts customers the more it attracts suppliers, and the BM is stabilized and the activity system is amplified.

Clearly there is a large utilitarian power gap between Cyberlibris and its customers; additionally the power gap is also normative, due to Cyberlibris’ dependence on symbolic resources. Cyberlibris has a dramatic lack of symbolic resources, essentially legitimacy because of the newness of the organization and the innovative nature of Cyberlibris BM which disrupts some sector parameters (Aldrich et Fiol, 1994). Cyberlibris legitimacy has to be established all the more because it is evolving in the highly institutionalized field of education. The digital library is at heart a teaching and learning aid, and the outputs of such aids are intangible and difficult to measure (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). Thus, the legitimacy of Cyberlibris is closely related to its acceptance by the business schools. The BM credibility is determined by the number of business school customers. It could be argued that business schools do not need the digital library because they have the alternative institutionalized option which is the physical classical library, or online resources. Some business school managers and professors initially found Cyberlibris irrelevant. This was hindering the development of Cyberlibris BM until 2008, when momentum began to increase.

**Publishers: A substantial normative and utilitarian power gap**

The most significant power gap is between Cyberlibris and publishers as they have a key resource needed by Cyberlibris and because of the one-way dependence that characterize the relationships between these two actors. Several publishers have also symbolic resources such as reputation. Their adhesion to the activity system of Cyberlibris gives some credibility to the BM and can encourage the other ones to join Cyberlibris activity system. However, more important is the utilitarian gap relates to the intellectual property, or more precisely the royalties managed by publishers. Moreover, this dependence is not mutual. Thus the disequilibrium of power is noteworthy. Publisher resistance to the digital library BM results in restricted access of Cyberlibris to the intellectual property. That explicates the poorness of Cyberlibris ebooks content which dissuades business schools and classic library to subscribe the digital library. The value created does not fully satisfy customers.

**Conclusion**

An examination of the BM literature leads to the observation that there is a dearth of studies that dealing with value creation through resource dependence theory. Resource dependence theory is a pertinent approach that can explain value creation through emphasizing resources and competencies that are brought to bear by different actors. In spite of the relevance of this approach in explaining value creation, it remains a theoretical perspective that has not mobilized to deal with BM. The aim of this paper is to observe and explain the connection between BM development and relationships between actors or more precisely the link between resource interdependencies, and power gaps that arise from, between focal firm and key business actors, and BM value creation.

Value creation, which is increasingly a process that transcends firm frontiers (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Chesbrough, 2003), is shaped by inter-firm relationships. BM construction and development is often most effectively achieved by organising a set of relationships around business actors. These relationships are based on needs that come to the front, prompted by material as well as symbolic and normative resources (Dwyer and *al*., 1987; Venkatraman et Henderson, 1998). This being so, external resources can create value in strategic terms, but as the case shows, they can also generate dependencies and power gaps, in relational terms, which can hinder the process of value creation.

In the Cyberlibris case, value creation depends on the power gaps between the focal firm and business actors of its BM. The higher the power gap, the more the value created is low. A considerable power gap hinders BM value creation. The high dependence of Cyberlibris on publishers and business schools and the significant power gaps, caused by intellectual property, financial resources and legitimacy, between the focal firms and these business actors, initially blocked value creation, especially for customers. The value creation results from the reduction of power gaps between the focal firm and different business actors.

Further, the case shows that the BM development and value creation are closely related not only to material resources but also to symbolic ones, essentially legitimacy. The literature suggests that a “good BM” has an advantageous cost and risk structure, proposes an indisputable customer value and permits the focal firm to capture a significant part of the value created (Teece, 2010). According to many authors such as Voelpel and *al*. (2005) Magretta (2002) and Chesbrough and Rosenbloom (2002), economic feasibility and BM profitability represent the variables that are likely to maintain external support and explain faith that actors could have in a BM. These authors highlight the connection between instrumental and material dimensions and the value created. Undoubtedly the instrumental dimensions are crucial for BM survival and development, however symbolic dimensions such as legitimacy are vital as well, particularly if the firm evolves in a field as high institutionalized as the educational (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990) and the publishing ones. This material conception of a “good BM” could be argued to be somewhat reductive.

The Cyberlibris case suggests that the definition of the BM activity system should be adjusted. Currently, it is seen as unit that is defined by technical, technological, cost, innovation and risk factors (Zott and Amit, 2010). Yet this research shows that the activity system is delineated by symbolic factors too. It refers therefore to exchange relationships that are dealing with the value created through material as well as symbolic resources such as reputation, relational resources and legitimacy. Such factors are likely to impact the perception of the value created which is not systematically based on an economic rationality.

To conclude, power gap analysis yield more understanding of the key factors in BM development and should be subject to further research.

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1. That information is collected on Cyberlibris web sites (http://www.cyberlibris.com/portal/fr/about/team.aspx). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)