

Multiplicity and Plurality in the World of Standards

Over the past years, the literature on standards setting, diffusion and adaptation has moved away from a relatively narrow preoccupation with technical standards to embrace a much broader trend: the multiplication of standards, standard setting arenas and compliance mechanisms. Standards have come to impact most spheres of economic and social life, quite often with a transnational scope and reach. Standards are designed to create new institutions in the global economy, by providing institutional logics in and between private and public sectors across national and sector boundaries. We live, it seems, in a “World of Standards”.

As a result of scholarly exploration into the broad field of standards, we now understand better what transnational standards are and how they contribute to the regulation and governance of organizations and behaviors. We also have a much better sense of the nature and complexities of the standard setting process and its dynamics over time. At the same time, though, our collective exploration has uncovered an unexpected and quite paradoxical evolution. While standardization would seem to suggest regularities, rationalization, and a reduction of diversity if not homogeneity and convergence, we can easily document a surprising multiplicity and plurality in our transnational world of standards. In most industries, fields and arenas, we find a multiple standards and standard setting kernels. In some situations, those standards and standard setting kernels compete fiercely; in other situations they appear to be rather complementary; they can also co-exist in stable form with little contact; they could finally come to combine through time with some degree of hybridization. We suggest that such multiplicity and plurality generate a whole set of new questions and therefore constitute an important frontier for the literature on transnational standards and standard setting.

The subtheme seeks to address some of these key questions around transnational standards, including:

- ✓ How can we explain the emergence and persistence of multiple standards and standard setting kernels?
- ✓ To what extent is the multiplicity and plurality of standards in a field a stable situation?
- ✓ What are the different paths in which multiplicity and plurality can reveal and express themselves – competition, complementarity, entrenchment, indifferent co-existence, hybridization, ...?
- ✓ When and how do standards disappear?
- ✓ How do organizations and other actors respond to and cope with the multiplicity and plurality of standards?
- ✓ What is measured by various standards and what are the organizational consequences following the adaptation of several standards that may or may not belong to the same kernel?
- ✓ How does this multiplicity and plurality of standards articulate with the multiplicity and plurality of implementation contexts?
- ✓ Do we find traces of a standardization of standards – a kind of meta-standardization of standard setting processes that would provide a background homogeneity to the apparent multiplicity and plurality?

Although we encourage papers with a strong empirical base, conceptual papers will not be excluded. We envision a subtheme in which papers vary according to their methodological grounding (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods), analytical strategy (case studies, network analysis, longitudinal), level of analysis (organizational, industry, field, inter-industry, inter-field), theoretical orientation, and empirical setting. In particular, we welcome contributions that explore fields and/or regional settings that have been under-researched (such as non-OECD parts of the world).

It is our intention to produce a special journal issue or an edited volume on the basis of the subtheme.

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Marie-Laure Djelic (djelic@essec.edu) is Professor at ESSEC Business School (Cergy Pontoise, France). She published a number of books, among which of particular relevance here on 'Globalization and Institutions', 'Transnational Governance', and 'Transnational Communities'.

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Frank den Hond (f.den.hond@vu.nl) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Organization Science, VU University (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). He published on how NGOs seek to pressurize firms to behave in more socially responsible ways, and in doing so contribute to the development and implementation of transnational standards.