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Finding the way in to a global industry! The usefulness of elite events to social science researchers

Abstract

Gatekeepers in social research constitute an interesting social phenomenon as powerful and normally unpaid agents of research access. Yet, questions relating to the recruitment of potential gatekeepers and to the nature of the rewards than they might seek are under-considered and locating key gatekeepers is often characterised as a matter of luck or happenstance.

This paper suggests that access to gatekeepers in the conduct of social research is critical when engaging with elite organisations and that it is something which cannot be left to chance but needs to be systematically pursued. Using the example of the shipping industry the paper explains how social researchers can make use of their understandings of the non-pecuniary motivations of gatekeepers in seeking research access. Negotiations with gatekeepers are more likely to succeed when researchers are able to mobilise non-financial resources which have some alternative form of 'exchange value'.

Every year executives come together at commercially organized conferences focussed upon human resource management in the shipping industry. At these events, major global players discuss a programme of issues related to the business of recruiting and training seafarers. However, these international conferences are both much more and much less than they seem. This paper explores their purpose and in doing so reveals the ways in which they can be useful to social researchers. It argues that unlike most conferences these can only be seen as 'field configuring events' to a very limited extent but that they nonetheless serve an important purpose in securing symbolic, and more significantly reputational, capital for both individual delegates and interested academics. The paper argues that researchers can mobilise such capital in their favour in negotiating research access.

Keywords: research access; gatekeepers; elite interviews; ethnography; maritime industry; seafarers

Introduction

Gatekeepers in society are a relatively taken-for-granted feature of a social landscape characterised by unequal power and the uneven distribution of resources. In everyday life, gatekeepers routinely control access to valuable benefits and services of both a commonplace and illicit nature. In relation to the commonplace, Michael Burawoy has, for example, described the way in which access to tools were controlled in one workplace where he undertook participant observation (Burawoy 1979). In this example delays to access could cost piece workers valuable revenue but gatekeepers themselves were not normally paid¹. In relation to illicit activities, money or payment 'in kind' is more likely. There have been interesting accounts describing gatekeepers' control of access to sex-workers (Hong et al 2014), and safe sites for drug use (Dickson-Gomez et al 2007) which may or may not involve the exchange of money/sex/drugs. Thus gatekeeping is a product of

¹ Notwithstanding Burawoy's description of how the gift a raffle prize to the 'tool man' shifted him higher up the 'pecking order'

structural power relationships (Corra and Willer 2002) characterised by actors with access to services/goods which are valued by others for whom access is contingent.

In relation to social research, gatekeepers are widely used but they are not generally paid for their 'services'. Thus in securing access to research sites, researchers in relatively weak positions have to make use of non-material resources in order to win the 'favour' of more powerful gatekeepers. This may involve them in expressions of friendship, appeals to rewards associated with broader values ('the greater good'), or promises of some future 'capital' such as an insight into a particular social group/behaviour that could eventually be 'converted' into a more tangible benefit for the gatekeeper or their organisation. Such interactions are complex and researchers may be confronted with settings in which they find they have little to offer. This is particularly true when attempting to conduct critical social research in business and elite settings with a view to the open publication of findings. As a result it has been reported that some researchers may be forced to simply change tack and give up on their original research objectives. Monahan and Fisher suggest for example that:

[...] scholars might find that *initiating* the project is the most difficult step of all. Establishing contacts and gaining permission to conduct ethnographic or qualitative research can be time-consuming and stressful processes that require researchers to be creative problem-solvers. In some cases, researchers simply change their focus of study entirely when they encounter persistently closed doors [...] (Monahan and Fisher 2015:710)

Previous research has noted the difficulties in securing access to corporate and elite settings (Laurila 1997, Undheim 2003) and some authors have highlighted the importance of training for researchers in techniques that might facilitate access with gatekeepers whose perceptions of them are key in advancing their studies (Kennedy-Macfoy 2013). However issues of research access, in general, and securing access through gatekeepers, in particular, are under-considered in social science literature (Johl and Renganathan 2010, Cipollone and Stich 2012, Crowhurst and Kennedy-Macfoy 2013, Monahan and Fisher 2015). It is within this context that this paper considers access by researchers to the global cargo shipping industry and the strategies that have usefully been employed in negotiating access with **key** corporate gatekeepers. Such strategies resonate with those adopted by some researchers conducting 'elite interviews' in that they make use of a temporary setting in which researchers are able to operate on level terms with gatekeepers projecting a 'business-like' manner and presenting an 'insider' identity (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2010). In discussing them it is hoped that others may be stimulated to find similarly creative ways of securing access to organisations which are relatively difficult to penetrate. We suggest that in focusing on research access as a more central concern, social scientists might draw upon their intellectual disciplinary resources to compensate for their relatively weak position in terms of power relationships with elites. In this paper we analyze a particular kind of regularly held event using a sociological framework which allows us to identify why it is that this event, in particular, provides an ideal venue for negotiations with gatekeepers. Using this kind of analytic approach we suggest that researchers may be better able to target their access-related activities.

The Global shipping industry

The international cargo shipping industry is segmented in terms of trade (tankers vs bulk carriers for example), in terms of location of ownership/registration, in terms of management (in house or outsourced) and in relation to labour (European vs Asian for example). This makes it a geographically dispersed, elite, and exclusive field for research which renders access and engagement challenging. The shipping industry guards its reputation carefully as a result of the close-coupled nature of reputation and business

activity and the negative impact of adverse public relations events (Author A 2016, Author A et al 2014). Gaining access to working cargo ships as sites of ethnographic work is particularly difficult as these are highly controlled, remote, spaces where access can only be secured with the formal consent of **key** gatekeepers² within shipping companies. However, since 1995 researchers from [name of research centre] have undertaken a variety of projects relating to seafarers' health and welfare with the co-operation of a huge range of organisations. In doing so, they have benefitted disproportionately from participation in maritime conferences with a very particular character. This paper describes how participation has yielded research access and what it is about these events, in particular, that renders them such rich 'fishing grounds'. In doing so it addresses the lack of discussion within the literature of the ways in which 'trust, respect and power, upon which the gatekeeper–researcher relationship is said to hinge, are operationalised in practice' (Crowhurst 2013: 465).

The paper will begin with a discussion of the methods which underpin it. It will then describe the particular kind of maritime conference that has facilitated access to key gatekeepers with regard to ethnographic research (on board ships) and elite interviews (Bottomore 1993) with CEOs/high level managers in the shipping industry. It will describe the agendas of those attending conferences as consistent with the development of an understanding of the events as tournaments of value. The paper will go on to explore how participation in such 'tournaments' can be turned to the advantage of researchers to initiate access negotiations with gatekeepers. In this way the paper will not only provide an insight into the ways in which other researchers might seek out similar opportunities when considering research with elites but will go beyond this to show that if access is treated as a central concern then social scientists have the tools to hand which will allow them to carefully select arenas in which they are most likely to be successful in their quest for access.

Methods

This paper represents slightly more than a 'tale from the field' as we have supplemented our ethnographic account with material derived from qualitative interviews which we undertook at both European and Asia-Pacific conferences. These interviews were carried out in order to provide us with an understanding of the motivations of attending participants. In turn, this has allowed us to consider how researchers might achieve their own, complimentary objectives by attending such events.

The conferences are organised by a commercial 'conference organising company' (SINTEL) and profits from the events are retained by them. Between us we attended nine Asia-Pacific Conferences (ACs) and nine European Conferences (ECs) in the period 2003-2017. Although these are events at which delegates and speakers are largely drawn from the shipping industry¹ there are some limited opportunities for academics with a high industry profile to

² Using the term 'key' we seek to highlight the extent to which shipboard research involves multiple gatekeepers (see also Crowhurst 2013) but cannot begin at all until access is agreed at an organisational level which is generally achieved via an approach to a 'key gatekeeper' (see however Eldridge 2013 for a discussion of multiple gatekeepers)

present research findings to the audience. As a result on some eight occasions we delivered invited presentations.

Initially our presence at the conferences was motivated by a desire to learn about the industry and to present our research findings to audiences in the hope of informing beneficial change within the sector. However, (Author A) began to recognise that these were venues where informal conversations with aggregations of elite gatekeepers were possible and that such conversations were easier to 'translate' into research access than more formal 'cold calling' approaches. This led us to consider what it was about these conferences, in particular, that yielded such advantages.

Having begun to analyse the conferences we embarked on a series of systematic observations and conversations in order to consider the ways in which they functioned and why they might produce the conducive circumstances in which conversations about research access might take place. Therefore at conferences, we sought out delegates from a variety of backgrounds, the organisers themselves, and exhibitors, in order to engage in informal conversations about the purpose of the conference, its value and benefits to them, and their organisations. We recorded salient details of these discussions in fieldnotes alongside relevant comments, elements of presentations by delegates, and questions and answers from the conference floor. In this endeavour we followed the conventions of traditional ethnography in not applying a specific sampling strategy but rather of pursuing opportunities as they arose. In addition, and using a similar approach, we conducted a series of dedicated face to face (n= 17) and email (n=3) interviews with conference participants. In the case of the face to face interviews these were recorded and transcribed prior to analysis. We rapidly discovered a high degree of consensus amongst delegates in relation to their purpose in attending the conferences and therefore we judged 20 interviews to be sufficient. In line with standard ethical practice we have anonymised the names of delegates, companies, and the conference organisers. We have also avoided naming the exact locations of conference events as these could result in deductive disclosure.³

Describing the 'SINTEL' maritime conferences

Each year a 'roaming' SINTEL European Conference (EC) and a fixed location SINTEL conference in the 'Asia-Pacific' (AC) is held. The EC takes place in different European maritime cities which are significant in relation to seafarer supply. The AC takes place in the same location each year when the prime movers of the global maritime industry (largely based in Europe/OECD nations - Author X 2013) descend upon the world's 'crewing capital' in the 'developing world'. National politicians generally open such events and outline local labour supply issues. This contributes directly to the development of knowledge (for researchers and industry participants) but such knowledge is enhanced in the course of

³ NB while the context of a tournament of values provides us with an opportunity to negotiate access with gatekeepers any future access is never publicly reported and pseudonyms are used in our research for all companies and ships. Thus a company cannot actually capitalise on providing access to us in relation to their own reputational capital via public endorsement from ourselves. Were this not the case, then the ethical ramifications of any such endorsement would require careful consideration.

conversations with other delegates who often have experience of labour market conditions elsewhere.

The events are organized by a commercial conference organiser which we have given the pseudonym 'SINTEL'. SINTEL has been remarkably successful in carving out a niche in organising such events. The AC is regularly attended by 400-500 senior company executives, high ranking government officials and prominent industry practitioners. The EC attracts smaller numbers but follows a similar formula, inviting ministers to the platform as opening speakers and encouraging attendees in senior industry positions.

The conference and its key players: embodiment of the maritime field

Shipping has been argued to represent a critical case with regard to globalizing processes (Author A and B**** 2007). It is internationally segmented in terms of capital, labour, and regulation, and highly fluid at the level of plant and in terms of the workforce. In 2010, there were 103,392 ships (Allianz 2012) on which an estimated 1.5 million seafarers from across the globe worked. The shipping industry is segmented with tankers/gas carriers/chemical carriers operating with broadly stricter health and safety regimes and in strict adherence to international regulations. Furthermore, these vessels tend to be subject to greater critical scrutiny from charterers (Walters et al 2012). The other side of this coin is probably found in the bulk carrier/general cargo sectors. Generally speaking there are proportionately more representatives of the 'high end' of the industry at the SINTEL conferences. Similarly there tend to be more personnel from large companies than there are from single ship operatorsⁱⁱ.

The shipping industry is highly cyclical, responding with a time lag to changes in world trade. At times of great demand, when freight rates boom, companies invest in 'new building' programmes some of which do not come to fruition (with the launch of a vessel) until the markets have 'turned' and freight rates have plummeted. This cycle produces fierce competition as, in times of freight rate depression, capacity is un-used/underused and some companies are faced with bankruptcy. This makes the industry a challenging field for social scientists as companies are reluctant to invest in research and development of their own unless it is associated with clear financial benefits and frequently adopt a rather reactive and relatively short-term view. This colours their general attitude to research and in the context of cut-throat competition they may be particularly suspicious of the risks (e.g. reputational) that could be associated with allowing outsiders 'through their doors'.

Another challenge for social scientists is the way in which the industry is organisationally fragmented. The 1970s saw the rise of what are known as 'ship management' companies. These companies do not own ships themselves (as owner-operators do) but instead provide vessel management services to owners who are unable to operate their own vessels due to lack of resource/lack of expertise. Both ship managers and owner/operators rely increasingly on seafarers provided to them by third party crewing agencies based in local labour supply hubs such as the Philippines.

From the perspective of the social scientist, the SINTEL conferences have the huge advantage of bringing together representatives from globally dispersed owner/operators, ship managers and crew agencies. Amongst the delegates there are also other 'service providers' such as companies producing training materials, travel agencies, engine and simulator manufacturers, insurers etc. In this sense the conference is representative of what

we might term the 'maritime field' (Di Maggio and Powell 1983). In practical terms alone it provides a unique resource for researchers as a comprehensive and concentrated source of elite maritime professionals and expertise.

The formal content of the conference is decided upon by organisers who consult, in advance, with representatives of the industry and with others related to the sector such as policy makers and academics. The registration fee is the biggest barrier to conference attendance (in excess of 1,000 GBP for foreign delegates and around 300 GBP for locals at the AC). There is therefore a marked exclusivity to it as only those who have the ability to pay (or who are invited as free VIPs) can attend. Despite the fact that they complain about its cost, delegates know that attendance immediately marks them out as part of the 'better end' of the industry. Just being in the audience makes a statement about the companies and delegates who are present. In this way the SINTEL conference provides an occasion for people who can fulfil the conditions of access to play 'a particular game' from which others are excluded (Bourdieu 2005). While they are at the conference, delegates are in a heightened state of awareness with regard to their corporate image and their social responsibilities. This can be of great benefit to researchers who would otherwise find many of their doors firmly closed. Inevitably it also means that researchers negotiating access to ships within this setting will be accessing a particular sector of the industry thereby introducing an element of sampling bias. However, such bias is largely unavoidable in a sector where poor ship operators avoid any kind of public scrutiny and where concerns about researcher safety would render access to 'bottom end' ships problematic. In these circumstances it is essential to acknowledge such bias recognising in the interpretation of findings that, for example, 'if this is the situation in the better end of the sector then conditions are likely to be worse for seafarers elsewhere'.

The conference 'stage' and its elements

The conference always follows a recognisable format/layout. The venue is a major international hotel with a large conference hall. To enter the hall one must first pass through an ante-room in which exhibition stands are set up for a considerable fee to allow advertisers to display their goods and services. The conference hall is the space for the expression of ideas and opinion. The exhibition space is an arena for commerce. Here discussion of the ideas raised on the conference floor 'oils the wheels' of interaction and provides skilled vendors (who slip in and out of proceedings to keep up to date) with an opportunity to begin new conversations with potential clients gently steering them towards a consideration of their products and services at appropriate moments.

In a number of ways, conferences such as these are important for the 'consecration' of the key players in the industry. As such, at these conferences, individuals are singled out and their achievements celebrated. In the 2015 AC, for example, two regular participants were given awards for their contributions to the industry. The 2014 EC ended with the chair extolling the virtues of the industry to the audience saying what a 'terrific industry' it was and how the safety record for shipping was wonderful with 'only 100 ships' sinking in the previous year! There are few comparable occasions that provide companies with such visibility and stature.

In this atmosphere of shared purpose where participants feel that they are representing the biggest and the best companies in the world, delegates relax their guard, 'let down their

hair' a little, and become rather more generous with their time than usual. In this arena researchers are allowed privileged insight into the practices of the industry. Maritime trade fairs also offer a venue for networking amongst industry players but in such contexts researchers have little 'place' and may be ignored by key stakeholders. Our reflection on these events led us to appreciate that there is a great deal that researchers can gain from the way in which the conference, as opposed to the trade fair, functions as a site for a tournament of values (Appadurai 2011).

Beneath the surface of the SINTEL conference

When considered in detail it becomes clear that SINTEL events represent much more than a meeting place for the global maritime elite. Here we find a space where a 'tournament of values' is made manifest and we argue that this is the most significant feature the conference when accessing key gatekeepers. In using the terminology of 'tournaments of value', we refer to Appadurai's seminal concept wherein he writes of:

[...] complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routine of everyday economic life. Participation in them is ... both a privilege for those in power and an instrument of status contests between them. (Appadurai 2011: 21).

Playing a part in the tournament of values predisposes elite delegates to engage with others at the venue. It also involves them in the adoption of a public mantle of 'open and transparent' leadership. In this moment, as they enact their role, we have come to understand that they are highly receptive to approaches for research access.

It is reasonable to understand these 'conferences' as exemplifying tournaments of values in much the same way as authors have described book fairs (Moeran 2010) award ceremonies (Anand and Jones 2008, Anand and Watson 2004) and trade shows (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006). In recent years, various ways of conceiving a tournament of values have been developed (Andermann 2009, Bernault 2010, Boeck 2008). Following this "pluralization" of the notion of a tournament of values (Moeran 2010), we suggest that participants at the SINTEL conferences use the events to espouse their 'superiority' over absent companies, as well as those in attendance, in support of the enhancement of 'reputational capital'. The term 'reputational capital' has been coined in management literatures to refer directly to the economic benefits that can be accrued in line with 'reputation'. Thus Fombrun and Shanley explain that:

Reputations signal publics about how a firm's products, jobs, strategies, and prospects compare to those of competing firms. Favorable reputations can therefore generate excess returns for firms (Caves & Porter, 1977; Wilson, 1985). [...] favorable reputations may enable firms to charge premium prices (Klein & Leffler, 1981; Milgrom & Roberts, 1986b), attract better applicants (Stigler, 1962), enhance their access to capital markets (Beatty & Ritter, 1986), and attract investors (Milgrom & Roberts 1986a). (Fombrun and Shanley 1990: 233)

The notion of reputational capital is connected to that of symbolic capital as defined by Bourdieu (1977, 1979, 1984, 1986). However, in making use of the term 'reputational

capital' we aim to be more specific. Our intention is to emphasise the purpose of many companies in supporting the SINTEL event. For them this is about creating the 'right kind of reputation' and this is measured in terms of the capacity of such a reputation to generate new business. In this way the maritime conference may be seen as similar to an award such as the 'Booker Prize' inasmuch as it is deemed to have the potential to deliver economic value at some point in the future (Anand and Jones 2008). In this case we suggest that a positive corporate image is fostered by SINTEL delegates in order to attract new clients. Shipping companies 'strut their stuff' in a variety of ways and in the conference we witness "the ritual and spectacular aspects of the social production of value" (Andermann 2009, p. 334) as conference participants attempt to subtly outdo each other in acquiring and making use of reputational capital⁴.

Thus, contrary to expectation, it is the acquisition of such 'fragile' capital, rather than an interest in the main content of the conference, which secures the involvement of delegates. As one delegate explained: "I think this particular conference has built such a reputation that just by being there means that you are 'in' (Interview 2013)."

The question for researchers invited to present papers at these events, therefore, is how to maximise the benefits of forays into such arenas where the agenda of most delegates is not directly related to the content of the presentations that are delivered from the dais. In many scientific arenas the delivery of a conference paper may contribute to what can be seen overall as a "field configuring event" (Oliver and Montgomery 2008). Thus researchers may actively take part in the configuration of the field of study and achieve a positive impact on the area or discipline. However in the maritime conference several elements which have been identified as key features of field configuring events remain absent. There is no evidence of a contest between delegates in relation to the establishment of one approach over another (see Garud 2008) and little evidence of competing 'logics' or competing accounts (McInerney 2008). Here leading companies present what may be regarded as the publicly acceptable face of shipping – responsible, caring and law-abiding. The 'sense-making' which occurs at these events is oriented towards establishing the legitimacy of the shipping industry and its leading players but it is not centrally linked to transformation within the field which is broadly seen as a critical element of field configuring events. There is little in the content of the event that serves to change the maritime industry or the overall activities of maritime companies. As one participant put it: "It's a bonus really if I get something substantial, I mean, in terms of ideas, out of this conference but like many others, I am here to [...] introduce my company to as many people as possible!" Whilst this means that social scientists may enjoy only a limited impact as a consequence of their

⁴ In making use of the term 'reputational capital', we are not unduly concerned with the critique (see for example Mills 2014) of those who point to the distinction between financial capital and the kinds of capital described by Bourdieu and extended here. We use this term metaphorically rather than literally. Whilst we suggest that the manipulation and staging of a good image amongst participating companies translates into the securing of a cache of reputational capital we are aware that its 'conversion' into economic capital in the longer term may be complex and is not fully under the control of the possessor of such capital. Thus we suggest that reputational capital is a "form of intangible wealth that is closely related to what accountants call "goodwill" and advertisers term "brand equity" (Fombrun 1996, cited in Worden 2003, p. 38). It is a fragile asset which takes time to create but is easily damaged even after many years of endurance (Hall 1993, cited in Worden 2003, p. 38).

delivery of papers/presentations these events do provide other benefits associated with unparalleled access to global elites.

Taking part in the ‘tournament’

For delegates the tournament of values takes place at several different levels. It is vital to achieve corporate visibility, perhaps by: securing a ‘slot’ as a speaker or chair; sponsoring refreshments; or setting up an exhibition stand. As one of the attendees explained, the conference is ‘all about money’. Our observations suggest that economic capital is reaped through intelligent orchestration of visibility and the creation of a ‘good’ image for companies concerned.

The importance of being seen

One interesting aspect of the conference is the ‘feelgood’ factor that it creates amongst the participants, both companies and individuals. As one attendee told us, it’s the annual ‘let’s pat our backs day’. Just by being there, they believe that they signal that their company matters. Companies which are absent, are portrayed as caring less, they are regarded as less predisposed to contribute to the improvement of safety and the industry at large. Presence at the event is more than a question of visibility, therefore, it is a statement of corporate values. In a way, a binary position is effected: it is about us (the attendees) and them (those who are absent). The conference is thus regarded as lending prestige and legitimacy to companies in attendance whilst implicitly disparaging absentees. As one interviewee put it:

“The conference is a prestigious event. It validates our stature in the industry ... (Interview 2013).”

Regular attendees find their meritorious identity moulded through consistent presence (Gray and Balmer 1998). They are therefore in a much better position to claim reputational capital than others. As a delegate put it simply:

“Some three people from our company attend this conference annually because our company feels that we have to have visibility in the conference. We need to be seen here because ...well ...we mean business! (Interview 2015).”

Individual companies also share in the image of ‘the event’ in much the same way that a product shares the image of a celebrity who endorses it (Javalgi et al. 1994, p. 47). The conference, therefore promotes an image of the “good guys” (who attend) and the “not so good guys” (who don’t).....those who ‘mean business’ and those who do not. Speakers from the floor regularly state that the problems of the industry do not ‘of course’ stem from the actions of any companies that are present. “It is those companies that are **not** ‘here’ that need to hear the message from the conference hall” we are frequently reminded. At the 2014 EC one speaker from a ship management company flattered the audience that ‘many of the companies here have strong brands and we are preaching to the converted’. Industry players may therefore openly state that attendance at the conference marks them out as superior, however, were they to maintain a silence on the subject the feeling of exclusivity amongst the participants would nevertheless remain palpable. In many respects such stance-taking prepares the ground for social scientists to ‘sow the seeds’ for their research.

Being asked to give a paper at the conference is regarded as a statement of corporate and/or individual credentials and high standing. Thus any speaker is to some extent worth associating with. A social scientist who is invited to speak from the podium has an immediate advantage in terms of securing the attention and interest of delegates. This offers an opportunity to engage the interest and commitment of otherwise inaccessible gatekeepers. Whilst this must always be followed up by more formal representations, our experience suggests that interaction at the conference smooths the way for future trust-based access negotiations. In an interesting way this mirrors the manner in which the conferences serve to stimulate business deals. Participants explained to us that they never expect to clinch a deal at the conference itself but anticipate reaping the benefits of the conference at some future date. One described how:

“We don’t expect any deal, whatsoever. We are there for inquiries. For example, in the 2013 conference, I had a chat with a company representative [...] There was an initial exploration and we exchanged business cards. It’s impossible, really, to close a deal right there and then. (Interview 2013).”

Our own experience at the conference gives an ‘insider’ insight into the process by which the realization of benefits can be achieved. In much the same way as the industry attendees hope to enhance their reputation for a purpose, [name of research Centre removed] delegates, and particularly Author A as the Director, attend such conferences in the hope of enhancing the reputation of the Centre. Further to this there is the hope that attendance may facilitate contact with industry members who might subsequently allow access to ships as research sites, and to seafarers and their managers as participants.

This approach to the conference has yielded many research rewards. In the SINTEL conference in Croatia in 2013, for example, Author A delivered a paper. This served the purpose of disseminating research findings (a central aim of XXXX) but also gained visibility. In the course of the two-day event Author A spent time in informal discussions with ship managers, regulators, and others interested in her research and secured verbal agreements to help. Following-up from the conference she secured immediate practical assistance from one high level representative of the European Commission and agreement from a managing director to let her visit him at his company in Singapore. The visit led to access to one of the company’s vessels in order to undertake ethnographic work. Similarly, Author B has found that the conference can yield remarkable access opportunities. Having met the owner of the leading crewing agent at the AC conference he was invited to meet with the Vice President of the company which now allows him regular, and unprecedented, access to employees for research purposes. Thus, with follow-up, the conference has directly yielded important results for [name of research Centre removed] our research.

Distinguishing a ‘tournament’ from a ‘field configuring event’ and why it matters

Moeran’s (2010) study of the ‘book fair’ and the associated tournament of values playing out amongst book sellers vying for status and sales inspired a consideration here of the undercurrents found around and within the regular SINTEL conferences. In this context we have gone beyond a consideration of some of the spatial dynamics associated with a tournament of values and given particular weight to the ways in which “participants seek to capitalize on opportunities made available in a specific field (Moeran 2010, p. 139).” In doing so we have discussed the opportunities for researchers themselves to further their

own agendas having grasped the implications of the motivations of more 'mainstream' delegates.

In the final analysis of our findings we have carefully considered the possibility that (like many others) the conference might be characterised as a 'field configuring event' (FCE) (see, for example, Anand and Jones 2008; Anand and Watson 2004; Glynn 2008). This would place it on a par with more usual academic conferences relating to particular spheres or domains which are relatively commonplace and easy to access. To some extent the SINTEL conferences meet the criteria that have been laid down by leading authors in relation to the development of the idea of FCEs (e.g. Lampel and Meyer 2008). For example, they allow for the assembly of maritime actors from diverse locations and backgrounds, they are of limited duration (normally two days), they provide opportunities for informal interaction, they include ceremonial elements, they are occasions for 'sense-making' and the exchange of information, and they generate social/reputational resources which can be deployed subsequently (Lampel and Meyer 2008). Crucially, however the conferences (whilst meeting these basic definitional criteria) do not meet the test of serving the function of 'configuring' or changing the maritime field. They do not appear to influence 'field evolution' in the way that scientific and academic conferences do. The audiences reflect this understanding in their description of the conference content as just the 'same [old] banana' every year (Interview 2013).

As such it is not as a venue for the dissemination of findings or the creation of 'impact' that we have found the conference to be **most** beneficial to maritime researchers. Indeed it may prove a disappointment in these respects. However, cloaked in a fabric of exclusivity, the conference creates a sense of community amongst participants. At many conferences 'regulars' greet each other as old friends and there is a strong sense of camaraderie. As a first-timer in the conference, observed with surprise:

"In the conference, you can talk to anyone. During coffee breaks, you can approach and talk to anyone, even company bigwigs like ship owners. It was amazing. And they were ready to listen. They were not snob. These are the people that you only see on newspapers and company websites and they are there talking to you, one on one, as if you are equals (Interview 2013)."

Thus these conferences function as meetings for a fluid 'club' where the creation of a 'good' image is the attraction of 'membership'. Researchers who are regularly present may also be temporarily accepted as members of the 'club' and are therefore provided with insight and access that they would more usually be denied. In recognising the different purposes of events such as these, researchers can make better use of the rare opportunities which are afforded to them.

Conclusion

Whilst not overlooking the multidimensional ways in which reputation is established (Fombrun and Shanley 1990) we conclude that the SINTEL conferences are of particular significance, as central sites of public rehearsal of mythologies of value (Andermann 2009). They provide companies with a platform from which to engage in acts of positive image-making with the end-view of "accumulating more" than competitors in terms of reputational capital. Furthermore, they provide an insight into the players and issues at

stake in the industry's own tournament of values and make manifest the structure of the sector (Moeran 2010). This in itself makes the conferences useful to researchers who are attempting to understand the 'mechanics' of the industry and identify members of the corporate elite - something which is far more complicated than nascent researchers may initially assume (Parry 1998, Harvey 2011). A researcher can learn a great deal from participation in such events where conversations run relatively freely and formal presentations augment the generation of knowledge. In this sense the conference may have similar benefits to those described by Monahan and Fisher (2015) in relation to familiarisation with a field. However, in their examples, conferences did not provide direct access to key gatekeepers. Rather the authors suggested that government and industry conferences allowed them to dip their toes in the water, metaphorically speaking, by putting them in contact with some of the people who could be useful **reference points** in future access negotiations. In contrast, we suggest that industry events involving corporate leaders in search of reputational capital, afford researchers an opportunity to 'dive right in' and begin access negotiations there and then. Our experiences of the SINTEL conferences suggest that they provide researchers with direct face to face access to gatekeepers in a highly conducive setting where they can engage on relatively level terms. The fact that they are there and are recognised helps to erode the power differential (Desmond 2004, Harvey 2011) that renders researchers periodically helpless when faced with individuals who are generally too busy to give proper consideration to requests for research access. As Hornsby-Smith (1993) observes:

[...] powerful people and institutions [...] deny access because they do not wish themselves or their decision-making processes to be studied, it is inconvenient, they are busy and wish to assert their rights to privacy [...]' (Hornsby-Smith, 1993: 55).

The conferences also allowed us to avoid the ethical dilemmas that have been described by some in relation to accessing elites (Hall 2011, Routledge 2002, Spencer 1982). While we were engaged in performances of professionalism (like other conference participants) there was no need to obscure our identities or obfuscate research plans. Indeed, in this corporate 'global village' where information is a central currency it would have been extremely difficult to do so given the international reputation of [name of centre]. It was perhaps this understanding that allowed the necessary trust (Eldridge 2013) to be rapidly established between us, as researchers, and key gatekeepers at SINTEL events. Given the discrete nature of the events and the separation of participants from their offices, ships, and seafarers, we were also able to avoid the kinds of pitfalls that are sometimes involved in dealing with gatekeepers situated within research sites (see for example Crowhurst's 2013 discussion of first tier respondent/gatekeepers).

There are likely to be elite events in other settings which could be similarly beneficial to researchers. However these should not be confused with trade exhibitions where researchers (as non-consumers) are inevitably out of place. Conducive occasions allow researchers to temporarily take part in events on relatively equal terms with key gatekeepers. Furthermore, they provide settings in which gatekeepers wish to position themselves as leading 'players' who have 'nothing to hide', and are 'socially responsible'. In such contexts there is much that can be achieved in relation to complex, geographically dispersed and highly competitive worlds. These are frequently beyond the reach of

relatively powerless academics who have very little to offer gatekeepers, and elites, in return for the considerable privilege of access; other than the promise of serving the 'greater good' and meeting objectives set with regard to corporate social responsibility.

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Author A (2013)

Author A (2016) 'Seabirds....'

Author A et al (2014) '....headway....'

ⁱ As delegates we had access to participant details including status and company

ⁱⁱ NB These are generalisations and there are inevitably exceptions