



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
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Department of Accounting

**Into the void: Institutional Sources of De Novo Organizational Identities in Nanotechnology Exploration**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, organizational theorists have demonstrated how mature industries and fields have well defined identity characteristics and associated norms that are shared across groups of organizations, help promulgate common responses to institutional pressures, and lead to sanctioning of those that deviate from accepted norms. Much less is known about where novel organizational identities come from in the first place. In this paper, we focus on how de novo organizations establish identities in a completely new, emerging industry where constitutive institutional rules defining appropriate activity and identity characteristics are ambiguous. Drawing on an investigation of the creation of the carbon nanotube industry, one of the first industries associated with nanotechnology, we investigate how the patenting activities of actors in two relatively established fields—fundamental science and corporate development—shape the patenting activity and resultant identities of de novo organizations. Our research contributes to theorizing about how new industries are spawned at the interface of multiple institutionalized fields, and how actors in those fields construct identity spaces that make the establishment of de novo organizational identities possible.