

Polanyi, Science, and Salesmanship

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Abstract

In *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi states that science is shaped by the “delicate valuations” of scientific opinions, and in particular, the level of interest the community has in a given topic or work. Though not enough to override the “accuracy” of the findings, *ceteris paribus*, higher community interest leads to higher valuations of scientific work. In our paper, we build on these ideas further to better understand how scientists can shift the interest of the scientific community, thereby changing the valuations of work within it.

We do so by incorporating recent work on reputational entrepreneurship from the field of sociology. “Reputational entrepreneurship” occurs when either the individual who is the subject of the reputation or third-parties take actions to enhance (or potentially lower) how that individual is regarded by a salient audience (in a particular domain or the general public). Often, the effects of reputational entrepreneurship become visible once the individual has died. But the death of “the salesman” — the subject of the reputation — can paradoxically provide an impetus rather than a hindrance to reputational entrepreneurship insofar as it mobilizes third parties to act as a “sales force” in posthumously promoting the individual’s accomplishments.

Using citations as a measure of valuation and death as an exogenous shock that affects efforts to “sell” scientific work but not the quality of the work itself, we estimate the importance of reputational entrepreneurship on the valuation of life scientists’ research. Insofar as reputational entrepreneurship is impactful, it is unclear whether the most effective reputational entrepreneurs are those selling their own work (“salesman”) or those promoting the work of others (the “sales force”). While the salesman has more incentive to promote her work, the sales force is likely to be seen as more credible. We find that by commemorating the death of a scientist, the sales force boosts the field’s valuation of the deceased’s work relative to what the salesman could have done had she remained alive. This suggests that while science seeks to divorce the researcher’s identity from their work, scientists’ identities nonetheless play an important role in determining scientific valuations.

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