Networks of Entrepreneurs Revisited – Dilemmatic Settings and Dysfunctional Effects during Company Foundation Processes

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Annotation
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Keywords
Dilemma, Entrepreneurship, Lock-in, Network, Network Capital,

Abstract
Many entrepreneurial research studies underline implicitly the positive evidence of a connection between the economic success and networks. However, any social relationship which an entrepreneur maintains does not necessarily have positive effects and consequently does not represent a capital to the new established organization. Dysfunctional effects result from the circumstance that the different actors have different, sometimes contrary requirements on networks. The aim of our article is to explore dilemmatic constellations within networks and to enable entrepreneurial founders or consultants to face the related challenges.

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1 Establishing New Organizations: Networks as Capital?

In entrepreneurial literature, most authors consider network capital as very favourable and it is expected as an indispensable condition to an establishment of an organization (e.g. Krücken/ Meier 2003, 72f.). Most studies assume that social relationships of a newly founded organization are accompanied by an improved access to goods, services, information, and ideas and thereby explain the success of a company - in other words: The social capital increases the interest rate to which financial capital can be invested (Burt 1992, 8f.). This follows the assumption that entrepreneurs require external support to market entry due to their often very specific qualifications, and their

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mostly small additional human and financial resources. Thus, for instance, Cooke (1998) proved that innovative companies obtain more than 60% of their innovation resources out of interactive learning processes with other firms (Kujath 1999, 140). Accordingly, missing qualifications, reduced access to sales channels, information, resources, capital or insufficient knowledge of cultural habits represent frequent reasons for the fall of new established organizations (Schwarz 1999).

However, entrepreneurial research has almost neglected the fact that social relationships cannot be equated with social capital or network capital. In contrast, recent studies usually underline the positive evidence of a connection between the economic success and networks (e.g. Fritsch 1999, Baron/ Markman 2003, Davidsson/ Honig 2003, Nicolaou/ Birley 2003). However, any social relationship which an entrepreneur maintains does not necessarily have positive effects and consequently does not represent a capital to the new established organization. Dysfunctional effects are widely ignored which result from the circumstance that the different actors have different, sometimes contrary requirements on networks. Entrepreneurs may become 'entangled' in their network just as well as they can use or develop it to their advantage (Dornisch 1999). If social relationships between entrepreneurs are broken off under intransparent circumstances, this can lead to frictions as well as to the damage of reputation and in the worst case to the loss of reputation. Inappropriate entrepreneurial behaviour can, blameworthy or blameless, be reported to a broad circle of potential actors via network channels and harm the possibility to create further relationships. Damaged reputation was, for instance, the trigger for the growth stagnation of an university spin off in the biotechnology sector (Maurer 2003, 134). In addition, Dubini and Aldrich remark that networks can absolutely have a frustrating effect for their actors, especially when they are time-consuming and remain without desired results (Dubini/ Aldrich 1991, Turati 1988). That means that supporting and hindering effects can result from the embeddedness into existing social relationships (Bühler 1999, 199). Meanwhile, network research has taken up this topic and considers social capital respectively network capital as a kind of capital that only can develop via social relationships (Moldaschl 2005, 54f. with reference to Adler/ Kwon 2002, Gabbay/ Leenders 2002, Leenders et al. 2001, Nahapiet/ Goshal 1998, Portes 1998).

From the terminological differentiation between social relationship and capital it becomes more transparent that entrepreneurial networks do not only have positive effects but also dysfunctional ones. The actual network capital of an entrepreneur or organization results from the 'difference' between positive and dysfunctional effects of social relationships, however, we consider this difference as an unintended side effect of the activities within networks (Moldaschl 2005, 58).

The aim of our article is to explore dilemmatic constellations within networks and to enable entrepreneurial founders or consultants to face the related challenges. In section 2, we will revisit current issues of perspectives of network analysis and will suggest supplementary theoretic enrichment in order to prepare the consideration of problematic network settings. Then, in the following sections, we will consider possible dysfunctional effects by which we will then be able to derive dilemmatic constellations of networks of entrepreneurs. Finally, we will draw conclusions of the discussed settings and derive further research topics.

2 Analytic Perspectives of Entrepreneurial Networks

The main advantage of the network perspective consists of its ability to cope with structural phenomena. Meanwhile, an extensive canon of methods to formalize and subsequently analyze network structures exists. Graph theory and sociometry (Jansen 2003, Pappi 1987, Moreno 1954)
put the network analysis approach into the position to draw conclusions on the structure and the composition of networks, such as overall density and centrality. The main interest lies in network nodes and relationships, being independent from persons. Thereby, in order to be able to assess consequences or positive and dysfunctional effects of social relationships in a broader way than the common egocentric network analysis, it is suggested that not only the relationships of the entrepreneurs are taken into account, but also at the relationships among the corresponding network actors (Jansen/ Weber 2003, 156). Thus, in a systemic examination there is neither a crucial entrepreneur nor his or her social relationships in the centre of attention but a system of mutually influencing relationships:

"Each configuration has to be considered as a system in which each attribute can influence all of the others by being an indispensable part of an integrated whole" (Miller/ Mintzberg 1983, 63).

However, most of the suggested methods generate a basically static picture of networks. However, in the course of time social networks are used and developed according to the requirements of the entrepreneurial actor (Granovetter 1985, Burt 1992, Greve/ Salaff 2003). Owing to the varying requirements an organization has to face in the course of its foundation process, different relationship become more or less important (Lechner/ Downing 2003). In addition, formerly positive relationships can turn out to be dysfunctional ones later on (Greve/ Salaff 2003). For instance, from an emotional as well as financial perspective an initially positively connoted family support may block the access to new opportunities, and thus entails negative effects. The focus on the static structural composition neglects the inherent relational dynamics. To assess the overall development of networks, the continuous interaction of mutually influencing network actors are to be put in the centre of attention. We assume that the network actors receive "...their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play" (Emirbayer 1997, 287).

In contrast to the common network analysis research agenda, we will mainly underline the interplay of actors and networks. In our comprehension, networks are, on the one hand, not exclusively the result of intentional action of an entrepreneur and so they cannot be analysed as a dependent variable (action determinism) (e.g. Birley 1985, Aldrich et al. 1987, Zimmer/ Aldrich 1987, Starr 1990, Starr/ Macmillan 1990, Larson/ Starr 1993, Aldrich/ Reese 1993, Hara/ Kanai 1994, Johannisson 1996). On the other hand, to explore dilemmatic constellations to actors, it seems just as little fruitful assume networks as independent variables (structure determinism) (e.g. Honig and Davidson 2000, Shane/ Venkataraman 2000, Singh et al. 1999, Brüderl/ Preisendörfer 1998, Hoang/ Antoncic 2003). From our perspective, social networks are neither a completely deterministic nor an optionally manipulable means to reach particular goals (Bühler 1999, 199f.). Consequently, they are neither dependent nor independent variables in the process of company foundation (Miller/ Mintzberg 1983, 63, concerning networks: Emirbayer 1997, 306; Nahapiet/ Goshal 1998, 251). This leads to a dual perspective on action and structure (following Giddens 1984). The possible scope of action of the network actors is predetermined through the existing network relationships. But in the course of time, network structures can (and have to) remain changeable through the action of network actors.

To analyse the interplay of action and structure, we will use three basic categories of the network perspective: structure, relationship and actor. In order to influence networks, the latter has to take network constellations as well as its own cognitive patterns and separate relationships and their specific dynamics into account. Thus, we differentiate between the structural, relational, and cognitive dimension of networks (Nahapiet/ Goshal 1998, 251f.).
3 Dysfunctional Effects

The special requirements on a management of networks become more clearly if one starts from the assumption that networks are structures without clear contours with respect to the membership status and the establishment of boundaries (Aderhold et al. 2001, 137). The establishment of social relationships equals a temporarily oriented expansion of the boundaries of the organization (ibid.).

The value of entrepreneurial networks is mainly based on the fact, that, in the ideal case, they provide options and thus a basis for flexibility. The notion of flexibility can be linked up to two different ideas (Goldberg 1994). On the one hand, flexibility delineates the ability of a system to return to its initial order. On the other hand, it refers to the range of possible adaptations to fit a completely changed environment, and thus the ability of a system to survive by quitting its initial steady state. Applied to the network context, both interpretations, notably the second one, imply that networks, relational and cognitive patterns ought to provide the necessary variance to face new challenges. Thus, given the premise, that networks should put the actor into the position to anticipate or react to environmental changes flexibly, dysfunctional effects mainly consist of hurdles to innovation or finally lock-ins. They may occur on all three levels of analysis as cognitive, relational or structural lock-ins.

3.1 Cognitive Lock-ins

In the analysis of the cognitive dimension, it is assumed that network actors act on the basis of commonly shared, interpretative patterns (Nahapiet/ Goshal 1998, 253). These patterns manifest in negotiated goals, interpretations, shared histories, and in a common language of the network actors (ibid.). They have an influencing effect on interpretative and decision-making processes in networks because while using them, actors selectively perceive and then dispose of information and resources. Consequently, the access to new resources and information lies within the boundaries of these patterns (Glückler 2004, 114).

An explanation to cognitive imprints is that actors are socialized in a particular way by their existing relationships. Thus, in the course of time, a fundamental agreement with the views of their actors in their patterns of thought and theories of everyday life (Ebers 2003). So, e.g. a simple continuation of well-known procedures which have been learnt in a parent organization may be explained (Birley 1985). As interpretative patterns develop and strengthen over a long period of time and thus the changes becomes more difficult, they become increasingly stable. We may then speak of cognitive inertia (Krücken/ Meier 2003, 78; Barr 1998; Barr et al. 1992; Bartunek 1984). Whilst shared values and attitudes are important and partly even resource sustaining, the thereby limited scope of perception proves to be a slight constraint. Crucial innovations or new developments are ignored. In addition, heterogeneous actors are possibly not appreciated due to divergent interpretative patterns (Wiesenthal 1999, 103f.; also Kirschbaum 1990, 83; Winand/ Nathusius 1990, 101). Hence, cognitive lock-ins reflect the circumstance that an entrepreneur or organization do not possess, have lost or have never acquired the ability to generate new perspectives and resources for networks.

3.2 Relational Lock-ins

The relational dimension of networks describes the features respectively the basis of the social relationship within the network. It is closely linked to the question, how once established social relationships influence current network actors. In this respect, Granovetter (1985) uses the term relational embeddedness. Here, trust and reciprocity describes the important mechanism how relational embeddedness of social relationships can develop: Whilst for example at the beginning of a relationship one strictly proceeds according to 'tit-for-tat', the interaction actors grant themselves
'credits' through service and their services in return – i.e., granted services are not directly demanded back or do not have to be compensated in immediate countermove (Kappelhoff 2001, 44). The relational lock-ins reflect the circumstance that existing relationships can hinder or even make impossible the emergence of new, advantageous relationships. Restrictions develop as in the course of time relationships have been established which have a standardizing and resource-binding effect. Thus, they limit a participant's possibilities to build up new relationships (Ebers 2003, 6).

3.3 Structural Lock-ins

In the course of mutual preferential treatment, structure specific norms and practices arise due to the intensity of the interaction of network actors. In turn, they may condition the number of possible participants and lead to a tightly coupled, semi-closed structure. Norms, on the one hand, offer orientation, but on the other hand, they determine the scope and the content of the obligations of the future network action (Nahapiet/ Goshal 1998, 254 f.). Entrepreneurs enter into particular commitments in their networks and receive desired results only by respecting these norms. Similarly to the danger of relational lock-ins, thus structural lock-ins can be observed, e.g. in networks whose cohesion are based on the sense of belonging to an ethnic group. Such networks represent a valuable and stabilizing aid to the transition to entrepreneurial self-employment (for instance as credit system; i.a. Brüderl/ Preisendörfer 1998, 215). This sense of belonging can initially be very helpful but at the same time, it can turn out to be constraining if the entrepreneur wants to enter into a further reaching relationship structure going beyond the ethnic group (Thomas 1999, 28; Min/ Bozorgmehr 2000). Another example is the rise and fall of certain industries in the face of important technological changes, such as the computer industry (Afuah 2000). Structural lock-ins reflect the circumstance that current network structures are stable to an extend that they inhibit necessary processes of adoption.

4 Dilemmatic Constellations in Entrepreneurial Networks

To illustrate dilemmatic constellations due to dysfunctional effects we rely on the three levels of analysis adequately. Relationships between entrepreneurs and their environment are mainly described in their structural dimension in entrepreneurial literature. Structure-related approaches start out from the deterministic cause and effect relation, however, they alone cannot explain the differences within network relationships. Therefore it necessitates to include a relational and cognitive dimension into the depiction of networks (Fuller/ Lewis 2002, 317f.). In addition, we assume that network dimensions change in their importance in the course of time and correlate with different stages of establishment of organizations (Greve/ Salaff 2003, 4). For that reason, we either revert, where empirical results allow, to the stages of a foundation process – motivation, planning, and establishment – (Greve/ Salaff 2003, 3f.), or we describe in a general way the tendency in the changes of network relationships of successful or less successful establishing processes.

Both positive and dysfunctional effects result in decisions of a dilemmatic character. Current investigations in management research increasingly refer to these moments of decision-making in which concurrently two mutually excluding actions have to be carried out. Here, the particular aspect is that the pursuit of one decision alternative (possibly) hinders or even inhibits the pursuit of the other one (Fontin 1997).

4.1 The Dilemma of Capacity

An often considered structural dimension of a network is its size. It comprises the number of social relationships of an actor. Various efforts and projects of divers origins propagate possibly big
networks for company foundations and support increasingly the initiation of new relationships (BMBF/ BMWi 2001, 6; Krücken/ Meier 2003, 83). The underlying assumptions are that in the positive, successful case of an organizational establishment the number of social relationships rises in the course of time, and that the network subsequently grows (Greve 1995, 1). According to Bühler (1999), the average network size at founding is about 3,5 network-relevant actors, 28,8% of the 556 questioned entrepreneurs indicated one to two relevant network actors, 10,6% more than five actors, and 27,2% were not able to name any relevant actors (Bühler 1999, 206, also Jansen/ Weber 2003, 151ff.). Some studies emphasize that in the stage of planning most of the social relationships are activated and used, whilst in a later stage of establishment the number of network actors decreases (Greve/ Salaff 2003). However, the integration of the new organization into current business structure will entail an increasing number of network contacts.

Besides positive effects through the emergence of new actors, there arises the danger that the expenditure on coordination rises along with the increasing network size and scarce resources like time and staff are consumed. Thus, the strategy to keep in contact with every once noticed actor can lead to dysfunctional effects. Resources, that for example are needed for the product development, are deducted from the actual business and used for networking activities instead. In this way, the external social relationships remain intact, but the pursuit of the actual business purpose respectively the organizational development itself is possibly neglected. A possible strategy to avoid resource consuming effects of an increasing network size, is to introduce elements of standardization into network interaction. This release of relational exigencies helps to increase the overall network size and assures a certain degree of variability on the structural level. However, if standardization is used excessively, cognitive lock-ins threaten due to over-routinization.

In turn, there is the danger that the rejection of network offers might deter further potential actors. Entrepreneurs often refrain from networking because of experiences of time-consuming and finally hardly efficient efforts. As a result, they avoid the establishment of new network relationships which causes, on the other hand, that from the perspective of regional actors the former are out of question for being relevant actors for wide-ranging network initiatives (Schwarz 1999, 121). Finally, the entrepreneur becomes uninteresting due to his or her insufficient integration into the network. Thus, the disappearing social relationships also diminishes the chances to network capital.

The dilemma of capacity consists of the unlimited possibility to establish new contacts, on principle. But if this potential is fully exploited, this can lead to a encumbrance of internal resources. For instance, crucial strategic positions on the market can be missed due to insufficient integration into networks. It is thus evident, that a management of networks means an inside-outside-harmonization of the organization boundaries (Aderhold et al. 2001, 137).

4.2 Dilemma of Intensity

The intensity of social relationships within networks can be specified in different ways. This can happen either in a quantitative way via the frequency of use, retracing the volume and amount of exchanged resources. Another possibility is the qualitative approach by means of emotional intensity and intimacy of relationships, but also through the complexity respectively multiplexity of the roles exchanged in these relationships (Greve/ Salaff 2003, 3; Scott 1991; Davidsson/ Honig 2003, 309). Granovetter (1973) uses the terms of strong ties and weak ties in order to distinguish the intensity of relationships.

According to Burt (1992), strong ties are based on both solidarity as well as on trust between the network actors and are the basis for social influence. Mostly, the number of strong ties is limited since fostering them requires time and attention (Thomas 1999, 18). Thus, e.g. trust can be built up
as an integration source of social relationships via frequent and successful contacts whose outcomes result into coordinated implicit contracts, the exchange of manpower or the common use of resources (ibid.). Consequently, a relationship is classified to be strong when this relationship is based on a high level of trust and mutual esteem of the actors' reputation. As reputation is defined as an expectation of the future behaviour of an actor which is based on experience (Glückler 2004, 251). This implies that for a repeated co-operation new arrangements concerning the underlying expectations about the co-operation do not have to be reassured at every single contact. The relationship receives a routine-like character and so saves internal resources (Hoang/ Antoncic 2003, 166). Hence, strong ties as a so-called enabling resources of foundation (Thomas 1999, 13) deliver, on the one hand, the reserve for the initial survival (Jansen 2001, 20) and are, on the other hand, in later stages a largely reliable basis for relationships under a high decision risk (Thomas 1999, 18f.; Sztompka 1993). In turn, relational lock-ins may appear due to the emergence of relation specific shared values and norms (Glückler 2004). Thus, a decreased structural redundancy due to the resource intensity of strong ties, as well as the danger of opportunistic behaviour can turn out to be dysfunctional. In addition, once broken trust can give rise to additional structural dysfunctional effects and can harm actors in the network for instance through unintentional information flow (Maurer/ Staber 2002).

Beside the general acknowledgement on the advantages of strong ties, Granovetter highlighted the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973). Weak ties are regulated not only on an emotional level, are less often fostered, and are seldom multiplex. Through these relationships, ideas, for example information relevant for new products or the company strategy, are obtained. They have a positive effect on the profitability and eventually on the survival of the organization with their quality to bridge both large distances within networks as well as to enable access to other networks (Burt 1992; McEvily/ Zaheer 1999; Singh et al. 1999; Jansen 2001, 20; Davidsson/ Honig 2003, 322; Hoang/ Antoncic 2003, 173; Glückler 2004, 253f.). It becomes comprehensible – and this has been corroborated by empirical investigations – that entrepreneurs or organizations, which also maintain or establish ties of a weak nature, are more successful in the course of time than those, which concentrate exclusively on strong ties (Dubini/ Aldrich 1991, 312). Since the information flow of strong ties is tightly linked to network actors and can be strongly influenced by them, weak ties enhance flexibility and innovative ability of a entrepreneur (Thomas 1999, 18; Jansen 2001, 20; Uzzi 1996, 197). They help to avoid cognitive lock-ins.

If both, strong as well as weak ties, can be advantageous, why do we talk about a dilemma? As stated, both kinds of ties are of importance during the corporation procedure (Hoang/ Antoncic 2003, 174; Greve/ Salaff 2003, 2). Newly founded companies have to find out the appropriate balance between strong and weak ties in the course of time. In this process, they have to master a dilemma of intensity: On the one hand, emotional intimacy and multiplexity can have routines in network relationships as consequences which make possible resource-saving arrangements and coordinated actions between network actors. On the other hand, social relationships ought not be tied so tightly that they hinder the innovation and flexibility of the organization, develop dependencies and in this way block the access to new resources. Neither exclusively strong or exclusively weak ties, nor average strong ties will provide a solution of the dilemma because the related advantages are equally important to entrepreneurs.

4.3 Dilemma of Compatibility

Heterogeneity serves as a measure for the difference of the actors or relations of a network. It concerns the topics of connectivity respectively compatibility of network actors. Network actors are compatible when they mutually perceive themselves as similar, and/ or find out that they both have complementary goals, and that they can mutually rely on each other. The following example
illustrates the underlying difficulty: companies, that are outsourcings from knowledge-intensive environments, frequently stem from the scientific field. As in this sphere a scientific socialization is assumed and since the previous network actors mostly have their origins in the field of universities, we can often presume a homogeneous entrepreneurial network. The related network is advantageous for university spin-offs, they can use laboratories at the former university location for advantageous conditions and continue to take part in the current scientific discourse (Nicolaou/Birley 2003, 349). Yet, if the entrepreneurs only rely on their scientific network, a possible drawback of this strategy emerges: If a homogeneous scientific network is maintained, the entrepreneur can, e.g. because of the missing contact to economical actors develop remote from the market. These scientific entrepreneurs are thus ignored because of insufficient economic reputation. The reasons for an often too low heterogeneity of the network are to be found in this case in the fact that new, economic-oriented relationships follow different accesses and logics compared with the ones in the scientific system. Because of their difference, these social relationships in connection with their potential are often not perceived (Staber 2001, 76f.). This mainly reflects cognitive and structural lock-ins according to insufficient heterogeneity.

The detachment from existing ties or the expansion of the network with new, heterogeneous actors can, for instance in entrepreneurial projects, lead to a gain in reputation and to improved access to venture capital. Pérez Pérez and Martínez Sánchez formulate, that e.g. university spin-offs first have close contacts to the parent organization from the stage of motivation to the stage of planning, but later these contacts are reduced (Pérez Pérez/ Martínez Sánchez 2003, 828). Other studies even qualify this statement and illustrate, that successful foundations do not exclusively rely on the relationships within their familiar environment, but build up a number of new and heterogeneous contacts during the stage of planning and establishment (Maurer/ Staber 2002, 182). Nevertheless, there is the danger that previous network actors, now and then even colleagues, mistrust this process, feel exploited or doubt the former colleagues' loyalty and trustworthiness, and finally the relation devaluates (Maurer 2003, 45; Liebeskind et al. 1996, 430f.; Frank/ Lueger 1995).

The position of a network actor is closely linked to the term of connectivity (Staber 2001, 70ff.). The actors will be recognized of the other actors under the condition that they perceive a possibility to connect to him in a certain, trusted way. This is to be understood in a bi-directional way – for the entrepreneurs themselves as well as for their potential and existing network actors. Thus, the dilemma of compatibility describes the following circumstance: Heterogeneous network actors promise to be the access to resources which are different from the own ones, for instance new financial capabilities and market information. In order to be able to build up new, heterogeneous relationships, this can possibly imply learning of different rules and logics. Simultaneously, entrepreneurs have to maintain the access of resources to formerly established network links and have to be perceived as being compatible by the latter. This implies cognitive overextension and the risk of structural instability.

5 Concluding Remarks and Research Implications

Entrepreneurial research uses network perspectives to explore structural interdependencies between entrepreneurial or organizational actors. However, the uncritical equation of network ties and network capital generates a desideratum of the current discussion. Network capital emerges if social ties are exploited by entrepreneurs in a specific context. For these contexts may change in the course of time, formerly advantageous contacts may turn into constraints. Even if an entrepreneur realizes that the structure of its network is not appropriate for his or her goals, ambiguous consequences for the company may arise from the reduction or expansion, changed intensity or
heterogeneity of the network. Dilemmatic settings demand strategies which – provided, that the latter are carried out successfully – do not end up as classic 'either/or'-decisions. Instead, the entrepreneurs should gain a solution via a dynamic synthesis (Staehle 1999).

To explore the variety of dysfunctional effects and dilemmatic settings, a particular approach how to consider network conditions was used which differs from current network analysing methods. The introduction of a three-fold distinction of a structural, a relational and a cognitive level helped to link up and evaluate current empirical studies in order to find the challenges of entrepreneurial networking. Thus, characteristics of one and also subsequent effects on the other levels may be examined simultaneously.

However, the study is of an explorative nature. Therefore, the next step to get further insights into entrepreneurial networks is to (re-)formulate basic research questions and to examine the dilemma hypotheses in detail. Prospective empirical research may be guided by the following questions:

- Which path-dependencies occur and how do they cause and effect cognitive, relational or structural lock-ins?
- Simultaneously to the mechanisms of organizational imprinting, which effects of imprinting can be observed on the different levels of analysis?
- In face of the difficulty to maintain a certain degree of stability in entrepreneurial networks, how do entrepreneurs manage the balancing of their network relationships in detail?

New distinctions enable new insights into (entrepreneurial) processes. Thus, we expect by means of the suggested distinctions and the related methodological approach introduced in this article an enhancement of the research field with regard to social networks of entrepreneurs.

References


