The Construction of Economic Intelligence as an Academic Discipline: A Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Whereas “intelligence économique” was unknown in France up until the 1990s, it is now the subject of many scientific publications and professional courses. This article addresses the institutionalization of economic intelligence and its construction as a field of study over the last twenty years. It maintains that economic intelligence constitutes a discipline and that there is no geographical diffusion of economic intelligence but national emergences. This work interests in its appearance in France since the 1990s through the dual process of standardization of economic intelligence practices and the establishment of a scientific community characterized, as explained by Jovanovic (2008), by the creation of researchers groups, a common training and the affirmation of a specific method.

Keywords: Academic Discipline, Business Intelligence, Disciplinary Construction, Economic Intelligence, Scientific Community

1. WHAT IS ECONOMIC INTELLIGENCE?

Economic intelligence relies on different definitions and a multitude of practices. Often incorporated within the framework of several disciplines, such as economics, management and communication, economic intelligence is sometimes considered as a “way of thinking and acting” (Levet, 2001, our translation) or sometimes as a tool for the management of strategic information (Giulia & Singh, 2011). Thus we wonder if economic intelligence is a discipline given its specific place in the literature. Firstly we will show how economic intel-
Economic intelligence constitutes an academic discipline. Secondly we will see that the boundaries of the field are fuzzy.

1.1. Is Economic Intelligence a Discipline?

Economic intelligence is “the collection, the processing, the prospective analysis and the use of information and knowledge in order to increase the efficiency of economic actors.” (Baulant, 2004, our translation) Its main task is to increase competitiveness of firms, regions and nations through a strategic management of information. Economic intelligence relies on useful tools for this purpose: watch, influence and network analysis. These tools are adapted to the current economic transformations: The globalization and the development of a knowledge economy (Baulant, 2004, 2007). The person in charge of economic intelligence coordinates the collection of economic, legal, technologic and societal information. The analysis of this information allows him to identify opportunities and threats for his structure in order to deal with issues such as:

A start-up identifies a new way of development and the market seems significant. The firm does not know if its project is feasible because even if the first tests are positive, some technical problems persist. How should the problems be solved and this project be discussed without having the idea stolen by a competitor?

The question of whether or not economic intelligence is a discipline will allow us to discover what this term really means in order to better address its emergence. An academic discipline is an axis of study constituted by declarative and procedural knowledge and scholar objects articulated around one task (Develay, 1992). This axis of study is governed by a set of customs and conventions maintained by the community members constituting the discipline.

Economic intelligence has declarative knowledge i.e. knowledge that might be expressed by the language: e.g. the information cycle, historical facts or current economic events. Procedural knowledge also plays a vital role in economic intelligence. As seen above, this kind of knowledge can be codified or tacit. In this way some of it can be learn at school such as influence or watch techniques. However, the abilities to understand and analyze the environment constitute some tacit knowledge. It is essential in economic intelligence because this knowledge allow individuals to adapt to the rapidly changing economic environment.

Made up of knowledge and scholar tools organized around a task, economic intelligence constitutes a specific axis of study. We will now study how it constitutes a community and is subjected to norms and conventions in France.

Quoniam, Trigo and Lucien (2009) showed the existence of an ‘economic intelligence community’ with the help of the automatic processing of contributory publications permitted by Web 2.0. This community is made up of students, teachers, researchers and professionals and is governed by norms such as the code of ethics of economic intelligence practices, implemented by the Fédération des Professionnels de l’Intelligence Economique (FéPIE), constituting a convention for the community.
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