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Harry Scarbrough and Jacky Swan

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Harry Scarbrough and Jacky Swan*

University of Leicester Management Centre, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH and
*Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

This paper provides evidence on the emergence and diffusion of the discourse of knowledge management. A literature review of the knowledge management and learning organization literatures demonstrates the lack of learning from one discourse to another and major differences in the concerns and issues that they address. At the same time, evidence on the level of interest in each discourse shows a tendency towards a normal curve distribution. Analytically, these findings suggest that the widespread diffusion of knowledge management might be explained in terms of the management fashion model. However, further consideration of the professionally-differentiated appropriation of knowledge management concepts by the information systems and human resource communities suggests that the fashion model provides only a partial explanation for the observed diffusion of knowledge management.

Introduction

This paper provides evidence on the emergence and popularity of knowledge management (KM). This evidence is analysed with the aim of explaining the widespread diffusion of KM across a large number of different groups and organizations, especially in the UK. In particular, we consider how far this pattern of diffusion can be explained in terms of the management fashion model (Abrahamson, 1996), and whether an alternative view might provide a more complete account of the emerging impact of KM.

KM is not easy to define and many definitions supplied in the literature are highly ambiguous. The ambiguity of the concept, however, is itself a clue to the fashion-setting possibilities of this discourse; ambiguity makes KM amenable to multiple interpretations and remouldings which potentially extend its relevance across different communities of practice. In this paper, therefore, KM will be defined broadly and inclusively to cover a loosely connected set of ideas, tools and practices centring on the communication and exploitation of knowledge in organizations.

In the first section of this paper, we will apply data from a review of the management literature to understanding the intellectual development of KM. This review highlights the distinctiveness of the KM discourse even when compared to the apparently related notion of the 'learning organization'. At the same time, the phenomenal growth of interest in KM poses an important test for our ability to explain the underlying dynamics of the process of its diffusion. The remaining sections of the paper will develop this argument by seeking to explain KM's diffusion in terms of the existing management fashion model. Comparison of that model with evidence on the spread and assimilation of KM tends to highlight the importance of the reflexive and locally situated processes through which management discourse is deconstructed and (re)applied within organizations. Taking this into account, the influence of the KM discourse seems to spread not through 'waves' of fashion but through a 'ripple' effect caused by the distributed triggering of such processes over time and across different communities. We conclude by arguing that this interpretation of KM is not only a more suggestive account than the fashion model

allows, but is ultimately more reflective of a profound societal shift in knowledge producing activities towards more situated, user-driven applications (Gibbons *et al.,* 1994).

Explaining the emergence of knowledge management

Recent years have seen an explosive increase of interest in KM. As well as a massive outpouring of books and articles on KM, many organizations have embarked upon their own KM programmes. A recent KPMG survey (KPMG, 1998) of 100 leading UK firms found that a staggering 43% of respondents were undertaking some kind of KM initiative.

This paper seeks to analyse the emergence of KM and to explore what it has to tell us about the production and appropriation of managerial knowledge. This analysis, however, has to begin with an acknowledgement of the limitations of much of what is written about KM. Many of the practices, recipes and tools associated with KM are mechanistic in their treatment of knowledge (for a critique see Spender, 1996). Important issues such as the influence of organizational context, the limitations of IT or the significance of tacit or situated knowledge are frequently glossed over. Many of these limitations have to do with the commercial exploitation of the idea of KM. Consultants are actively marketing KM as an attempt to harness and exploit the 'intellectual capital' of the organization – a notion that sits comfortably with the crowning of knowledge as the primary source of productivity, innovation and wealth creation in globalized, post-industrial economies (Drucker, 1993). Efforts to promote KM often involve a re-packaging of tools and practices which have been developed in a different context. Moreover, as we note later, commercial exploitation is more likely to be achieved by selling tools and technnologies than it is by advancing understanding. As a result, the emphasis in much of the existing literature is heavily biased towards technological solutions and lacks any deeper analysis of knowledge. Having outlined some of the limitations of the existing literature on KM, in the remainder of this paper we will bracket the issue of this discourse's content and validity and rather focus on the way KM is constituted by the process of its own diffusion. In particular, we will

consider the extent to which the pattern of KM's diffusion can be explained by the existing management fashion perspective, and whether important aspects of that pattern may lead towards a different explanation.

Many academics may be tempted to dismiss management fashions as not worthy of serious research. To borrow the words of one recent study of Business Process Reengineering (BPR) (Willmott, 1995), management fads and fashions seem to represent something of a 'turkey shoot' for academics, with their overblown claims and exaggerated rhetoric providing easy target practice for their academic critics. On the other hand, the sheer pervasiveness of such fashions and their ability to address the felt needs of a wide range of stakeholders, suggest that the dynamics of fashion-setting are worthy of serious academic consideration (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997). Fashion, it seems, is an important medium for the communication of new, or at least repackaged, ideas and thus an important stimulus to innovation. As such, whatever its intrinsic merits, KM deserves attention as a site for the complex and distributed practices which constitute a particular form of knowledge production in contemporary society.

The discourse of KM

Grint's (1996) work on BPR suggests that the emergence of management discourse can usefully be explored through both internalist and externalist accounts. The internalist, that is intellectual, argument for the emergence of KM can thus be related to the development of a world view which sees knowledge as the defining characteristic of a new historical epoch. The spread of this world view is indexed by the proliferation of a variety of terms and treatises dealing with the 'Post-Industrial Era', the 'Information Age' or the 'Knowledge Society' (Stehr, 1994).

Meanwhile, an externalist account of the rise of KM would, in Grint's terms, highlight its ability to 'generate a resonance with popular opinion', encompassing 'symbolic and cultural', 'economic and spatial', and 'political and temporal' resonances. This is consistent with Abrahamson's (1996) account of management fashion as more than just an aesthetic form, but as a response to performance gaps opened up by technical and

economic environmental change and collective beliefs as to which management techniques may help to fill these gaps:

> 'Management fashions are not cosmetic and trivial. Management fashions shape the management techniques that thousands of managers look to in order to cope with extremely important and complex managerial problems and challenges.'
> (p. 279)

Certainly, we can also view the development of KM as one of the managerial responses to the empirical trends associated with post-industrialism. These trends include the growth of so-called knowledge-worker occupations (Drucker, 1993) and technological advances created by the convergence of computing and communications technology (Easterby-Smith, Snell and Gherardi, 1998). In organizational terms, this new 'era' is typified by flatter structures, debureaucratization and 'virtual' or networked forms of organization. These technological and organizational changes are closely intertwined, with new organizational forms both reflecting and advancing the use of new information technologies such as 'groupware' and intranet applications. In this context, KM can be seen as a response to both the problems and opportunities created by new ways of organizing business. In particular, as businesses are increasingly stretched across time and space, reorganized along process or product lines, and restructured around virtual teams and networks, they may lose the opportunities for the casual sharing of knowledge and learning induced by physical proximity. As Prusak (1997, p. xiii) puts it: 'If the water cooler was a font of useful knowledge in the traditional firm, what constitutes a virtual one?'. For some writers, KM is an instrumental response to these dislocations of the corporate knowledge-base.

If KM is partly a response to the problems of globalization and business restructuring, it also reflects the more positive management agenda arising from greater awareness of the productive role of knowledge in organizations. The recent period has seen a convergence in interest across a number of fields in the intangible assets of organizations. Thus, work in the strategic management field on the competitive impact of 'core competencies' or 'capabilities' (Scarbrough, 1998), has been paralleled by developments in the 'human

capital' and 'social capital' literatures (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). In the KM field, specifically, an important strand in the literature has developed a view of knowledge as an organizational resource. As Amidon puts it:

> 'What has emerged is an international community of theorists and practitioners dedicated to shifting the management orientation from one of accounting and financial assets to one of measuring and monitoring the intangible assets relevant in the knowledge economy.' (Amidon, 1998, p. 47)

While the notion of 'asset' simply means something useful to the organization, other writers have sought to give knowledge more substance by defining it as 'intellectual capital'. Roos and von Krogh develop this argument as follows:

> 'Gone are the days when companies were seen only as physical entities that converted raw materials into tangible products. Today, physical capital is of less relative importance for creating and sustaining competitive advantage than intellectual capital. For many companies the market value of intellectual capital is now too large to be categorised as goodwill. The emerging recognition of knowledge and intellectual capital has laid the groundwork for new, knowledge-based concepts, theories and practices of management.' (Roos and von Krogh, 1996, p. 333)

An example of the intellectual capital approach to KM comes from Dow Chemicals in the USA. This firm used to have a data archive that was described as 'a disorganized mess of intellectual capital' (Mullin, 1996). The company embarked on a KM programme where intellectual capital was managed by creating a widely accessible database, built from 30 years of patent records, to keep track of the many patents. Now the system and processes have spread to include all of this company's intellectual assets and the company earns a high income through licensing of its technologies (Mullin, 1996; Petrash, 1996).

To summarize, the analysis of the KM discourse highlights its development as a response both to the ideological debate around the concept of the post-industrial society as well as to the shifting economic pressures confronting business organizations. Thus the discourse of KM is polymorphous. The use of IT to 'capture' knowledge is an important ingredient, but other elements

such as the 'intellectual capital' concept reflect the increasing need to organize, quantify and valorize knowledge to address problems of business restructuring and competitiveness.

Review of the KM literature

In order to better address these questions about the origins and formation of KM, a literature review was conducted of the growing number of KM books and papers between 1993 and 1998. This review (Scarbrough, Swan and Preston, 1999) was commissioned by the UK's Institute of Personnel and Development. It sought to locate KM in the wider context of the management literature by contrasting this term's usage and diffusion with the parallel, but distinct topic of the learning organization. Both these topics are purportedly concerned with the strategic management of knowledge and the learning and innovative capacity of organizations.

Some of the main findings of this review are presented below. These are telling, both in terms of establishing the credentials of KM as a management fashion, and in terms of identifying the dominant discourse of KM. Important differences are revealed in the themes and concerns addressed by KM and the learning organization literatures particularly in relation to their treatment of human and behavioural issues. Finally, the findings from this review of KM will be compared with data from other sources on the shifting fortunes of BPR in the literature, allowing us to derive some conclusions on the ephemeral nature of success in the management field.

Three linked approaches were adopted for the literature review of KM and the learning organization (LO). Initially a quantitative analysis of search terms was carried out; utilizing the search technology now available to users of comprehensive on-line journal databases as ProQuest Direct (PQD) and BIDS. This analysis was then developed by categorization of those themes, topics, sectors and approaches which emerged during such searches. In tandem with these approaches the review also followed a more traditional route, selecting from an inevitably variable literature the more substantial and influential work relevant to researchers in this area. The search was limited to the period 1993–1998, in part to ensure contemporary coverage, but also as a result of early

feedback from the quantitative mapping of search terms, which indicated that this period would capture a large part of the KM literature.

There were two key findings from the quantitative analysis. First, concerns the way in which terms such as 'KM' have achieved prominence during the 1990s. To illustrate, the search of PQD compared the interest afforded to the terms 'KM', with that afforded to the LO. Figure 1 strikingly illustrates the ways in which these management discourses rise and fall. Figure 1 shows that a decline in interest in LO references since 1995 has been mirrored by a sharp increase in references to KM – there were more references to KM in the first six months of 1998 than cumulatively in the previous five years.

The increasing attention being paid to KM, and the concomitant fall in LO references, shows a clear resemblance to the bell-shaped popularity patterns noted in earlier management fashions such as quality circles (Castorina and Wood, 1988). KM is still in its ascendancy, but the alacrity with which the term has been adopted hints strongly at an impending decline. This diffusion pattern also raises the question of whether KM has taken over the LO 'baton' in the fashion relay. In this case, KM might be better described as a relabelling of LO rather than a distinctive fashion needing its own explanation. If this is the case then KM would be expected to pick up on core issues concerning the LO – core issues of organizational development, human resource management and people development. To explore this further, an
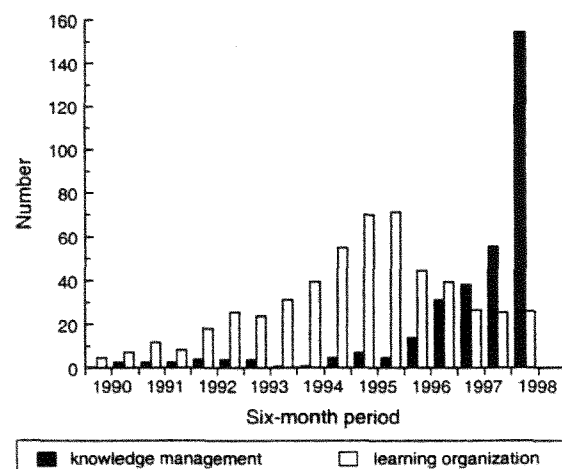

Figure 1. ProQuest references to 'knowledge management' and the 'learning organization'

analysis was conducted comparing major themes discussed in articles on KM and the LO, cross-searching with other core terms. Table 1 reveals striking differences in the foci of these literatures. Overall, the shift in emphasis from LO to KM is linked both to a sharp decrease in people management and development themes, and to a significant increase in the number of articles addressing information systems, information technology and intellectual capital.

Now, such a shift in emphasis needs to be carefully interpreted. LO is only one of the available perspectives on learning. The latter field is increasingly divergent and there is an extensive literature on 'organizational learning' which is both more broadly based and arguably more conceptually rigorous than LO texts (Easterby-Smith, Snell and Gherardi, 1998). It is certainly possible to conjecture that the growth in KM involves an attempt, albeit subliminal, to operationalize organizational learning ideas. Nevertheless, if we focus simply on the KM and LO literatures alone, our literature review leaves us in little doubt of the clear differentiation in both tone and content between these discourses. The conclusion seems inescapable; KM is not a development of, but rather a divergence from, the literature on the LO – a new fashion in its own right with a new focus on tools and systems, rather than on people and processes.

The relative importance of IS and IT and the neglect of human issues is further illustrated when we classify KM articles by related themes (see Table 2 which categorizes articles from the 1998 search). This shows that IS/IT accounts for approximately 70% of all themes discussed in KM articles.

If KM shows few traces of cross-fertilization from the literature on the LO, the above account does highlight some important parallels with BPR. Despite the protestations of some writers and consultants that KM is qualitatively different from BPR, or even an antidote to it, their respective literature profiles show distinct similarities. For one, there is the explosive growth in interest that we see in both cases. Alongside our data for KM we can set a similar review conducted for BPR (Tinaikar *et al.*, 1995). This review of BPR-related articles on the ABI/Inform database (precursor to PQD) found the number increasing from 18 in 1991 to 42 in 1992 and 187 in 1993. Equally important was the similar fixation with IT – no less than 51.2% of these articles referred to the role of IT in BPR.

What does this data have to tell us more generally about the production and distribution of managerial knowledge? Without offering any conclusive findings, the literature comparison advances a number of possible propositions. These can be summarized as follows.

(a) The production and distribution of ideas follows a sharply cyclical pattern, with new discourses waxing and waning in the space of a few years.

Table 1. *Comparison of core issues in LO and KM in PQD articles 1993–1998*

'Learning Organization' *and*	Number of hits	'Knowledge Management' *and*	Number of hits
training	98	information technology	58
organiz(s)ation(al) development	65	intellectual capital	48
human resource (or HR or HRM)	42	information system	40
management development	25	training	26
employment	18	human resource (or HR or HRM)	17
people management	16	career	8
information technology	14	people management	7
career	11	organiz(s)ation(al) development	4
information system	10	rewards	4
diversity	7	HR information systems	2
personnel management	6	management development	2
intellectual capital	5	selection	2
rewards	4	diversity	1
appraisal	3	employment	1
HR information systems	3	all other combinations	0
people development	2		
performance management	2		
selection	2		
all other combinations	0		

Table 2. 1998 KM thematic categories

Thematic category	Number	%
Information Technology	73	40
Information Systems	51	28
Strategic Management	35	19
Human Resource	9	5
Consultancies	8	4
Others: Libraries, Academic, Accounting, Marketing	8	4

(b) There seems to be limited learning from one discourse to the next. Despite the common ground it shares with the LO, articles in the KM field pay little attention to the debates engendered by this parallel literature. This suggests an autistic tendency in the production of managerial knowledge, with particular discourses locked into their own language games and professional domains.

(c) On the basis of our limited review, there is arguably a correlation, at least in recent years, between a discursive affiliation to technology and growth of interest. The evidence on the diffusion of BPR and KM certainly suggests this. The comparison of their heightened popularity with the LO's more modest diffusion also provides (admittedly weaker) evidence for the companion hypothesis – i.e. that popularity is actually heightened by glossing over the complex and intangible aspects of human behaviour.

KM and the fashion model

In seeking to explore and explain these propositions, we can turn to work on management fads and fashions. Each of the discourses described above displays the classic characteristics of a management fashion. For example, the curve that we find in the generation of articles conforms to the normal distribution which Abrahamson (1996) cites as evidence of the fashion cycle. Moreover, the explosive rate of growth in these topics can be explained in terms of 'bandwagon effects'. Such effects, it is argued, are heightened if the innovation is characterized by a mixture of ambiguity and simplicity (Clark and Salaman, 1996).The ambiguity of KM (and BPR and LO as well) is underlined by the KM literature itself and by the growing number of works which claim to provide essential definitions of the concept (Alavi

and Leidner, 1997). Ambiguity is an important feature of fashions because it allows interpretive flexibility on the part of those adopting the new ideas (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch, 1987). Thus the idea can be interpreted and implemented in ways which are appropriate to the context of the potential adopter. Ambiguity thus increases the scope for an idea's diffusion. It also enhances market opportunities for those 'experts' promoting diffusion because they can claim specialist expertise in interpreting and resolving such ambiguity.

Simplicity has long been recognized as a facilitator of diffusion. Presenting the innovation as the best solution, and the only one that makes sense (i.e. as 'best' practice), increases the perceived advantage of the innovation and simultaneously helps to reduce its complexity (Rogers, 1983). A single identifiable 'best' practice means that the problems of either choosing among complex and varied alternatives or designing a unique solution 'from scratch' are removed. In the case of KM and BPR, simplicity seems to be heightened by appealing to technology as the enabler. The lure of technology is perhaps best illustrated by comparing the diffusion of BPR to earlier socio-technical systems approaches. It is argued by critics that BPR is little more than a reworking (and an impoverished one at that) of socio-technical systems thinking (e.g. Mumford, 1994). Yet BPR was embraced by industrialists with an enthusiasm that socio-technical systems did not encounter. A key difference in these approaches was BPR's emphasis on technology as the vehicle for mobilizing change. In this way, complex questions of organizational and behavioural change, which are explicitly addressed by socio-technical thinking, could be conveniently glossed over.

In management fashions, simplicity is also linked to ambiguity. Simplicity is communicated by best-practice case examples (these are numerous in KM). These provide 'simple metaphors' of a generic kind of practice which can be creatively re-interpreted for almost any context. This combination of simplicity and ambiguity means that fashion-setters can sell their services by offering reassurance to clients in terms of their ability to solve current problems, while at the same time opening up new uncertainties which will ensure their continued involvement (Sturdy, 1996).

These intrinsic features of a discourse such as KM are handily supplemented by its extrinsic

features, and in particular its distinctive character relative to competing discourses. A striking feature of KM, BPR and LO discourses, for example, is the lack of any cross-fertilization or learning transfer from one discourse to another. Though this may seem perverse, especially in relation to so-called 'Knowledge Management', this autistic quality can be readily explained in terms of the need to differentiate new discourses from competing ideas so as to achieve wider currency (and a new wave of commercial exploitation). Thus, KM has been carefully positioned by some of its promoters as either the antidote to or successor to BPR (IBM, 1998).

The extrinsic features of discourse are further analysed in Kieser's (1997) analysis of the management 'bestseller'. In this light, the KM discourse can be understood as a rhetoric which has all the right ingredients. First, it is presented as a radical departure from existing ideas. Managers are often cynical about the so-claimed 'newness' of new ideas, so for KM to 'take-off' it would have to dissociate itself from existing approaches in order to avoid being dismissed merely as 'old wine in new bottles'. The gap between KM and the LO is perhaps a reflection of this need to be distinctive in order to be new. KM is also presented as an imperative – a 'must do' if managers are to avoid impending disaster in the light of environmental changes. It is linked simultaneously to highly valued principles such as efficiency, innovation, knowledge sharing and management control, without acknowledging the internal inconsistencies between these principles. Many examples are provided of 'outstanding' firms that have achieved extraordinary gains despite the most gruelling and challenging circumstances. But this is done in such a way that managers in other companies need not feel stigmatized – the process of change itself demands the replacement of previously effective recipes (Kieser, 1997).

The limits of the fashion account of KM's diffusion

The fashion metaphor provides an elegant description of some aspects of KM's diffusion. However, there are limits to the explanatory power of the fashion metaphor (Abrahamson, 1996). First, it is important to note that unlike aesthetic fashions which are almost self-consciously

ephemeral, management fashions actually deny their own nature. Far from being cosmetic or transient in nature (and popular because of this), management fashions will only diffuse if they claim to be fundamental in their application and timeless in their scope – if they claim to offer solutions to real or perceived efficiency gaps. Thus it is widely argued that KM is more than just a new fad:

> 'To a growing number of companies, KM is more than just a buzzword or a sales pitch, it is an approach to adding or creating value by more actively leveraging the know-how, experience, and judgement resident within and, in many cases, outside of an organization.' (Ruggles, 1998)

While some of these metaphorical flaws are already recognized in the existing literature, a second, more critical, limitation of the fashion perspective has to do with its emphasis on the diffusion episode of knowledge production (Sturdy, 1996). Existing accounts of management fashion focus mostly on the diffusion process and on the actions of suppliers (i.e. fashion-setters) in the development and communication of new concepts to users. This is a partial account of knowledge production for at least two reasons. First, it tends to treat the adoption of new ideas as an episode that is somehow discrete from their implementation. Second, it treats users as rather passive recipients of ideas invented elsewhere, albeit partly in response to the felt demands of users.

The questionable nature of these assumptions is highlighted by the available literature on innovation. A number of studies caution against a diffusion bias by revealing the extent to which the diffusion and implementation of ideas are interdependent episodes within a recursive process of change (Scarbrough, 1995; Swan and Clark, 1992). In such a process, the users and suppliers of new ideas are actively engaged in reconstructing and reconfiguring the very concepts that they are implementing (Fleck, 1994). These experiences are simultaneously communicated through intra- and inter-organizational networks (such as networks of professional and trade associations) in which users are active constituents (Newell, Swan and Robertson, 1996).

Unlike changes in the styles of clothes and cosmetics, change in organizations is a complex and management-intensive process with consequences

that are sometimes far-reaching and long term. Loh and Venkatraman (1992), for example, consider how Eastman Kodak's success in outsourcing its IS department triggered a band-wagon effect, with many firms copying Kodak's strategy in the hope of gaining the same success. Far from being short-lived, this has had far-reaching and long-lasting implications in practice for the restructuring of organizational and inter-organizational relationships, and for the re-distribution of power and expertise. The adoption of 'fashions' results, then, in a reshaping of work practices and communities and this may occur in non-uniform and sometimes unpredictable directions.

Closer scrutiny of processes of implementation shows how the same loosely defined set of ideas may be assimilated and implemented differentially across a range of social communities depending on the particular characteristics of these com-munities (Newell, Swan and Robertson, 1997). KM is a case in point. KM has been enthusiastically embraced by communities of IS specialists and practitioners. The focus among this community is on developing tools and systems for KM. The concept of KM, then, has helped IS specialists to legitimate and mobilize management support for organizational change programmes aimed at using IT to capture and codify knowledge. The 'softer' side of KM – that which focuses on the accumu-lation of intellectual capital through the develop-ment of skills and competencies – has often been lost in these initiatives. The broad KM project has been assimilated within the IS community as an agenda for investment in new IT tools and systems. Contrary to any developmental agenda, the dominant KM trope here is the expropriation of knowledge from individuals and groups.

The enthusiastic championing of KM by the IS community can be contrasted with the somewhat belated reaction of Personnel or Human Resources specialists. Having recognized its growth in popularity, KM is being reconstructed by the HR community as the creation of intellectual capital through the development of employees and the management of organizational culture (Lank, 1998; Mayo, 1998). The fact that KM is a popular term provides a convenient trigger with which to resurface and revitalize change processes asso-ciated with earlier LO initiatives.

This initial evidence from the IT and HR communities shows how the same ambiguous KM

concepts are being appropriated in very different ways according to the particular interests and professional agendas of different communities. The implications are that the original idea gen-erates multiple, discrete and distinctive changes in practice, some large, some not so large, and that these will shape the trajectories of future changes. Management discourses do not simply appear, grow and disappear (as would a single wave) to be ultimately replaced by some new management fashion. Rather, they have a variety of disjunctive and enduring ripple effects. Existing models of management fashion fail to take into account the different ways in which management discourses are deconstructed and appropriated within hetero-geneous communities.

Conclusions

We have seen that in terms of the literature, the fashion model offers some useful explanations for the characteristics of KM. The ambiguous, simplified and differentiated character of this and similar managerial discourses is related to the interests of knowledge suppliers in perpetuating a fashion cycle of ideas. However, our account has also explored some of the limitations of the fashion model, particularly in terms of its treatment of the adoption process and the relatively passive role it affords to the recipients of new discourses. We have sought to highlight the recursive interaction between the KM discourse and the local context of its implementation. Instead of the uniform movement of ideas and practices described by the fashion metaphor, we see KM spreading through a ripple effect in which it serves as a trigger for activating locally-situated change processes.

This alternative view arguably possesses some useful explanatory power. In particular, by shifting our focus to the active deconstruction/ reconstruction of KM by different management groups, we are able to reframe some critical features of the discourse. The ambiguity of KM, for example, is seen less as a resource for supplier groups than for the users of the discourse (Clark and Salaman, 1996). Such ambiguity opens up new opportunities for change and for furthering the political agendas of professional and occu-pational groupings. It also provides a framework for the localized sense-making processes of man-agers seeking to direct and manipulate change

programmes and helps to legitimize those pro-grammes at the local level (Watson, 1994).

Similarly, the puzzle of the barriers to learning associated with management discourse can also be addressed from a new perspective. The lack of learning transfer that we note between the KM and LO discourses can be related to the distributed and path-dependent nature of the adoption of these discourses, with a variety of communities encountering these ideas in different ways and at different times, making the exchange of knowledge and experience across communities problematic.

Taking these points together, we conjecture that they provide an insight not only into the diffusion of KM, but more generally into the reasons why management knowledge is diffused and appro-priated according to a cyclical pattern. The im-plication is that reflexive exploitation by user groups is a more important driver of that cycle than the opportunistic tactics of knowledge sup-pliers. In this way, the observed characteristics of KM suggest the need for a new perspective on the diffusion and implementation of management discourse. In particular, where the existing model seeks to explain *fashions* in the plural, such an account may have the potential to unpack fashion itself as a distinctive process of knowledge pro-duction. By focussing on the interactions between the processes of diffusion and application, we may be better able to explain the discrete nature of management discourses in terms of their 'dis-embedding' and de-legitimating qualities (Francis and Southern, 1995). Similarly, such an account would recast the importance of social networks in spreading new ideas; networks being seen less as channels of distribution, than as the medium through which ambiguous programmatic ideas are translated into knowledge commodities and politically-charged discourses. At the same time, the greater importance attached to users would help to explain the role that discourses such as KM play in helping managers to 'make sense' of processes of change (Coopey, Keegan and Emler, 1997).

By reframing our interpretations of manage-ment discourse, the argument outlined here may finally be able to locate the diffusion of KM in a much wider debate about the changing character-istics of 'knowledge production' in contemporary society. In particular, our analysis of KM resonates with two important contributions to that debate. Thus, Castells argues that a disinctive feature of the current period is the extent to which know-ledge has been freed from established material and institutional constraints. Knowledge now acts upon itself in an accelerating spiral of innovation and change. Castells summarizes the shift as follows:

'What characterises the current technological revolution is not the centrality of knowledge and information but the application of such know-ledge and information to knowledge generation and information processing/communication devices, in a cumulative feedback loop between innovation and the uses of innovation.' (Castells, 1996, p. 32)

Second, and relatedly, Gibbons *et al.* (1994) argue that we are currently experiencing a fundamental shift towards the reflexive production of more trans-disciplinary knowledge. In this new 'mode' of production, knowledge is increasingly gen-erated by users in the context of its application.

This emphasis on the role of users and on knowledge produced at the point of application is entirely consistent with our analysis of the diffusion and implementation of KM. The irony is that while much of the literature on KM is prescriptive or technology-driven, the ambiguous and pervasive character of this body of knowledge empowers a wide range of interpretations and initiatives by the 'users' of the discourse. Though the promoters of KM tools and concepts certainly exert an important influence, the impact of context and of managers' sense-making activities in assimilating such offerings needs to be given due recognition. While the suppliers of new panaceas need to be dedicated followers of fashion, the same does not apply to their managerial clients within firms. The translation of the nebulous vocabulary of KM into organizational practices is not so much a determinant of action as a trigger of it. In that sense, KM practices within firms need to be seen as less a product of fashion than of mediated organizational responses and interpretations. To that extent, while KM may well have failings as a management discourse – too many, certainly, to enumerate here – it does provide an excellent vehicle for deconstructing its own diffusion.

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