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Popular concepts and the business management press[☆]

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Abstract

This article looks at frequency patterns of popular management concepts among scholarly and non-scholarly publication outlets. It analyzes differences in the general frequency patterns and reviews propositions concerning time-lags in the diffusion of management ideas in different media, using publication data for four popular management concepts (Total Quality, Lean, Outsourcing and Re-engineering) over an 18-year period. The analysis reveals differences in the presence and frequency patterns of the concepts studied in different types of publications. The assumption of a general time lag between non-scholarly and scholarly media cannot be sustained. The observed patterns can be related to the working logics of the different type of media as well as to the characteristics of the different concepts studied.

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Keywords: Popular management knowledge; Management fashion; Business management press; Article counts; Scholarly journals; Non-scholarly journals; Business newspapers; Diffusion

1. Introduction

In recent years the emergence, diffusion and consumption of popular management knowledge have become a field of study in their own right. Research has addressed

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channels and carriers of popular management knowledge, including business schools and formal management training (Engwall, 1992; Sturdy, 2000), and management gurus and consulting firms (Clark & Salaman, 1996, 1998; Carter & Crowther, 2000; Jackson, 2001). Some researchers have proposed a fashion perspective based on an analysis of factors for fashion supply and demand to understand the development of popular management ideas over time (Abrahamson, 1996; Carson, Lanier, Carson, & Guidry, 2000; Spell, 2001). Others have concentrated on analyzing power and political action related to the adoption of popular management ideas in organizations (Gill & Whittle, 1992; Kieser, 1997) or on the rhetoric and discourses associated with popular management knowledge and the ways in which these enable managers to make sense of an increasingly disruptive environment (Jackson, 1996; Case, 1999). Only a small fraction of the existing research on popular management knowledge seems to be directed towards the role of the popular press in the diffusion and legitimization of management ideas and practices (Mazza & Alvarez, 2000). This is somewhat surprising, given the general importance of popular media coverage for trend-setting in fashion arenas (Suzuki & Best, 2003).

This article raises some issues for the future discussion of the role of the business management press in the diffusion and consumption of popular management ideas. More specifically, it sets out to study differences in the coverage of popular management concepts in different types of business media—scholarly and non-scholarly journals as well as business newspapers. The article is structured in three parts: The first part outlines the basic theoretical ideas underpinning the analysis of popular management concepts and the business management press. The second part presents the study and highlights the most important findings. The third part discusses and develops the empirical findings in the light of our understanding of the role of the business management press.

2. Popular management concepts and the business management press

The analysis of popular management knowledge opens three major avenues of thought about the development of this area of knowledge. Firstly, it stresses the historical and institutional contingencies of managerial knowledge. Management concepts such as Business Process Reengineering, Total Quality Management or Management by Objectives depend on particular discourses and institutions. They are subject to processes of creation, carrying, translation, and application. Secondly, it refers to a particular type of dynamic that is reflected in the growth and decline of the popularity of particular management concepts over time. From a fashion point of view, for example, it could be argued that the overall pattern of growth and decline in popularity is associated with a given cultural artifact's capacity to produce status and legitimacy through socially meaningful distinction and/or group integration. And last but not least, the study of popular management knowledge helps us to develop a better understanding of the local consumption of packaged knowledge.

Management knowledge is composed of rhetorical as well as technical elements (Zbaracki, 1998). A management concept like Total Quality Management, for example, typically consists of an ensemble of assumptions and claims about the functioning of organizations, the economy and society that are related to a set of more or less precise suggestions and rules about how to manage organizations. Following this line of argument, Huczynski (1993, p. 444), for example, holds that a management idea is “a fairly stable body of knowledge about what managers ought to do” and refers to Kramer’s (1975) definition of management concepts as

systematically organised knowledge applicable to a relatively wide area of circumstances. As a system of assumptions, accepted principles and rules of procedure [...] [it] assists managers to analyse and explain the underlying causes of a given business situation and predict the outcome of alternative courses of action. (Kramer, 1975, p. 47; quoted in Huczynski, 1993, p. 444)

With reference to Barthes (1967), Midler (1986) suggests that the discourses in which popular management techniques are embedded typically concern not only the description of the management method in question, but also convey sets of assumptions about the nature of the firm and a discourse on society. And as Kieser (1997) points out, management concepts (or management techniques) do not exist independently from their ideological and rhetorical constituents. Rhetoric, claims, and assumptions are integral parts of a management technique.

A management concept in its abstract form is necessarily different from its application in an organization. Astley and Zammuto (1992) have argued that management knowledge fulfills not only technical but also conceptual and symbolic functions for an organization. It seems that these symbolic aspects play a stronger role in the case of fashion consumption (Finkelstein, 1998). A concept and its potential meanings are reconstructed and actualized when the concept is applied in a local setting—a process that has been referred to as “translation” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; using a term proposed by Latour, 1986, 1991) or “editing” (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Popular management techniques are commodified and come in a de-contextualized, packaged form (Gill & Whittle, 1992; Røvik, 1999; Donaldson & Hillmer, 1998; Carter & Crowther, 2000), which makes it easy for them to “travel” from one context to another. In addition, their diffusion is helped by the social and political “resonances” (Grint, 1994) created by their rhetoric.

Popular management concepts are produced through and materialized in books, journal articles, seminars, organization charts, corporate mission statements, organizational stories, etc. This article takes a particular look at the business press, focusing on three different types of media: scholarly journals, non-scholarly publications, and business newspapers. Whereas management books might be more adapted to study the contributions of individual management gurus, periodicals seem more adapted to the study of the development of popular management ideas over time.

The business press provides more than the transmission of ideas conceived elsewhere. Mazza and Alvarez (2000) have claimed that the popular press serves as the principal arena for the production and legitimization of management concepts. It

does not just serve the popularization of ideas created in academia, but functions as an autonomous channel of knowledge production and dissemination. In their analysis of the development of Knowledge Management discourses over time, [Raub and Rüling \(2001\)](#) have argued that many journals seem to support a particular interpretation of the underlying concepts and thus to cater for a particular type of audience. In this sense, business media become actors in the translation of popular management ideas. This is in line with [Abrahamson's \(1996\)](#) idea that the business press plays an important role in shaping collective beliefs about legitimate management techniques.

One of the recurring issues in this debate concerns the relation, similarities and differences between the popular press and the more academic outlets, and the necessity of distinguishing between them ([Spell, 1999](#)). While some authors see the academic sphere as the origin of innovative management ideas ([Beyer, 1992](#)), others have argued that new knowledge tends to travel from the realm of management practice to academia. [Barley, Meyer, and Gash \(1988\)](#), for example, have been able to show that the interest of the 1980s in organization culture emerged largely in the popular business press and from there shaped the rhetoric about culture in academic publications. [Spell \(1999, 2001\)](#) provides some evidence for time lags in the appearance of a popular management idea in the popular and the academic business press. Concerning the issues that tend to be covered by different types of outlet, [Mazza and Alvarez \(2000\)](#) note the relative importance of ideological (as opposed to technical) statements and of heroic success stories in the popular press, concluding that this press plays a significant role in making popular management ideas seem taken-for-granted, and [Mazza \(1998\)](#) argues that a concept's presence in the popular press might be a better indicator of its diffusion than its presence in more specialized outlets.

While there seems no doubt about the differences between scholarly and non-scholarly publications, none of the major studies have looked at differences in the frequency patterns of popular management concepts, or at how these patterns may be related to variations in the coverage by both scholarly and non-scholarly journals as well as by major business newspapers. In order to provide some empirical grounding, the present article aims at developing an analysis of differences in the frequency patterns of popular management concepts, and investigating differences in the coverage of popular management concepts in different types of outlets. More precisely, the study looks at three issues: similarities and differences in overall frequency patterns among concepts and publication types; time lags between scholarly and non-scholarly publications; and publication dynamics over a concept's lifecycle.

3. The study

The methods used in the empirical study designed to address the three research issues presented above will now be described, after which the most important

findings relating to frequency patterns, time lags, and publication dynamics will be presented.

3.1. *Methods*

This study uses article counts as a common proxy for tracing the popularity of particular management concepts over time (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Spell, 1999, 2001; Mazza & Alvarez, 2000). The counts are based on publication data for three different sub-sets of publications contained in the ABI/Inform Global database. This database, which covers more than 1600 business and management publications, is the most complete business publications database currently available and was assumed here to be reasonably representative of the English-speaking business management press. Other researchers investigating changes in the popularity of management concepts over time have regularly been using ABI/Inform (e.g. Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Spell, 1999, 2001).

ABI/Inform provides a classification of scholarly and non-scholarly publications based on a publication's content, intent and audience. A publication is considered "scholarly" if it is "authored by academics for a target audience that is mainly academic, the printed format isn't usually a glossy magazine, and it is published by a recognized society with academic goals and missions" (Information on Proquest—ABI/Inform website. A complete list of the publications included and their classification is available from the present author). An additional classification proposed in ABI/Inform makes it possible to single out business newspapers. For the purpose of this study the number of articles relating to selected popular management concepts was counted for scholarly and non-scholarly journal publications, as well as for the business newspapers referenced in ABI/Inform.

Four different popular management concepts were analyzed in the study: Total Quality, Lean, Outsourcing and Re-engineering. These concepts were the most frequently mentioned "new management ideas" by a group of 70 senior managers in a prior study on managers' perceptions of popular management knowledge (Rüling, 1998, 2002). The term "Lean" was chosen to include the variants "lean management", "lean organization" and "lean manufacturing". For the other concepts, several spelling variants were used to ensure the inclusiveness of the search process.

Different measures were used to track the development of a concept's popularity over time. First, the overall number of articles in the database referring to a concept in its overall reference (including title, keywords and abstract) was counted for every year from 1986 to 2003 for all three publication types (scholarly, non-scholarly, and business newspapers). Whereas other authors (e.g. Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Spell, 1999) have restricted their search to assigned subject keywords only, I have chosen this more inclusive definition in order to capture the overall number of references made to a concept, and to also include other articles that did not focus primarily on a concept.

The initial "Reference" scores were supplemented by a second count including only those articles in the three types of publications that referred to a given concept in the article's title. The hypothesis underlying the count of "Title" frequencies was

that the deliberate reference to a concept in an article’s title was used to alert the reader to this article’s particular focus on the management concept concerned. “Title” and “Reference” scores for each of the concepts were used to calculate a “ T/R ratio”, which indicated the share of articles referring to a concept that at the same time use the concept in their title. For example, a T/R ratio of 0.39 for “Lean” in 1995 indicates that in this year almost 4 of 10 articles referring to “Lean” carry this term in their title. A high T/R ratio could mean that a concept is used to signal (and lends itself to signaling) either sharp distinction from or strong adherence to a particular current, whereas a low T/R ratio could indicate that a concept has become part of the normal or standard references in the business management field that do not enjoy any particular distinctive capacity (see the detailed discussion below).

The initial frequency data had to be adjusted for the overall development of the number of publications referenced in the ABI/Inform database according to a method suggested by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999). All frequency counts were normalized on a basis of the total number of articles for each publication type included in the database in the year 1995. For example, if the initial “references” count for a concept c in a given year n and a given publication type p is R_{cp} , its adjusted value corresponds to $(P_{p1995}/P_{pn}) \times R_{cp}$, where P_{pn} is the overall number of articles being referenced in the database in the year n for publication type p , and P_{p1995} is the overall number of articles in this publication type in the base year 1995. This adjustment was necessary to compensate for the increase in the overall database content from about 133 000 referenced articles in 1986 to 935 000 in 2003, and the changing weight over time of the three publication types (see Fig. 1).

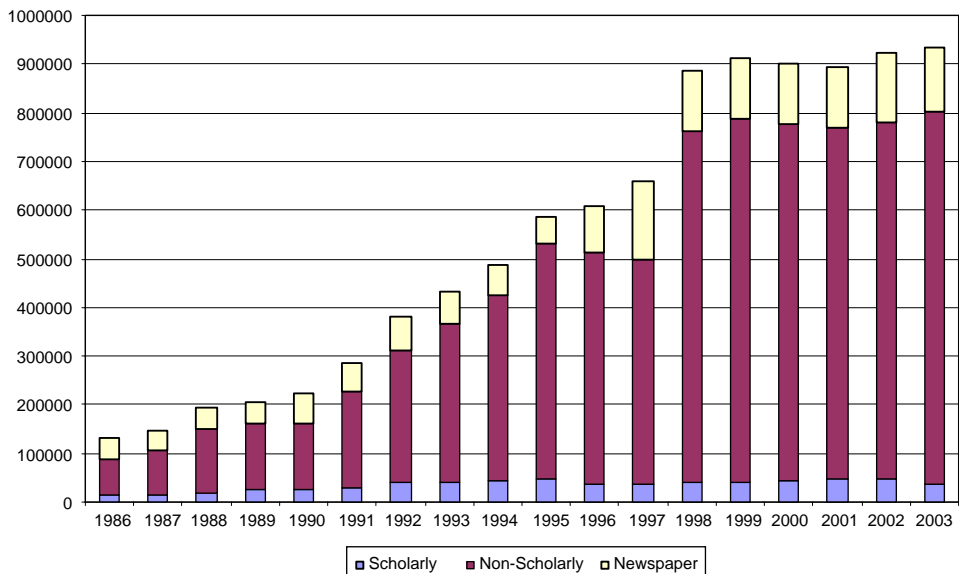


Fig. 1. Total numbers of articles in ABI/Inform database.

In order to provide a more meaningful indication of a concept's incidence within each publication type, I calculated an additional variable based on the overall number of articles referring to a concept in a given publication type and year, and the overall number of articles referenced in the database for the publication type and year. The "incidence" scores below indicate the number of articles out of every 1000 referring to a given management concept within a publication type for a given year. For example, an "incidence" of 8.10 for "Total Quality" for scholarly publications in 1999 means that about 8 of every 1000 scholarly articles referenced (or 0.8 per cent) refer to "Total Quality". It was assumed that the incidence score provided a significant indication of the degree of popularity of a given management concept in each publication type.

Given the relatively low number of observations per concept, I decided not to use statistical testing but to base my interpretation on the graphical representation of the publication data. The findings presented below are summarized in [Table 1](#).

3.2. Frequency patterns

The article counts show different overall patterns for the management concepts studied (see [Fig. 2](#)). While Total Quality follows an almost symmetrical bell-shaped curve of growth and decline in the 1989–1998 time period with a maximum of almost 2500 articles in 1993, Lean exhibits a relatively stable pattern with about 400–500 articles each year during the entire study period. Both patterns contrast that for Outsourcing, which exhibits continual growth beginning in 1990 and culminating in 2003 with about 2000 articles. Re-engineering, finally, exhibits a pattern similar to that of Total Quality. Here, the main difference is the stronger, almost exponential 20-fold increase in the number of publications on Re-engineering with about 50 articles every year up to 1990 and almost 2000 articles in 1995, followed by a relatively longer decline phase.

Another difference among the overall frequency patterns for the four management concepts can be found in the T/R ratios. Total Quality has the lowest average T/R ratio over the study period—on average 12 per cent of all articles referring to "Total Quality" in a given year use this designation in the article title—and Lean has the highest T/R ratio with an average of 0.33, which means that one-third of all articles referring to Lean use this word in their title. A relatively high T/R ratio means that the designation of a management idea figures relatively more often in an article title, which could be interpreted as an indication that the designation serves as a distinguishing signal to avert the reader to the article in question. In other words, if T/R is relatively high, it could mean that a relatively high proportion of articles talk specifically about the idea in question, whereas a low T/R ratio could indicate that an idea is mentioned in many articles but only as one idea among others and not meriting special mention in the articles' titles. The average T/R scores for Outsourcing (0.27) and Re-engineering (0.24) lie between the two extremes. However, while the T/R score for Outsourcing seems to have remained relatively stable over the last 10 years, the T/R score for Re-engineering is marked by a steady decline since 1995 from a high of 0.38 to a low of 0.11 in 2003.

Table 1
Summary of findings

	Total Quality	Lean	Outsourcing	Re-engineering
Overall frequency pattern	Bell-shaped, symmetric	Stable	Constant growth	Bell-shaped
Differences between publication types (based on incidence scores)	<p><i>Scholarly</i>: Strongest incidence, slow decline, incidence stays clearly above initial level</p> <p><i>Non-scholarly</i>: Incidence grows in parallel with scholarly publications, but faster decline to initial level</p> <p><i>Newspapers</i>: Very low incidence</p>	<p><i>Scholarly</i>: Growing incidence from 1992 onwards</p> <p><i>Non-scholarly and newspapers</i>: Relatively stable incidence over whole period with tendency to decline for non-scholarly journals between 1992 and 2000</p>	<p><i>Scholarly, non-scholarly, and newspapers</i>: Incidence scores in all three publication types develop in parallel following a pattern of constant growth (with a slight decrease between 1996 and 1998)</p>	<p><i>Scholarly</i>: Strongest incidence, slow decline with incidence remaining at high level</p> <p><i>Non-scholarly</i>: Same pattern of explosive growth followed by a phase of gradual decline, incidence back to initial level</p> <p><i>Newspapers</i>: Very low incidence</p>
Time lags	Absolute frequency scores show non-scholarly ahead of scholarly publications; however, incidence scores show no time lag	No visible time lag	Incidence grows most strongly in non-scholarly publications in the initial phase, but then flattens out; scholarly journals grow constantly over the whole period; newspapers show the strongest growth rate in the later period	Absolute frequency scores show a lead of non-scholarly publications; incidence scores however suggest parallel development with only a short time lag (1 year lead for non-scholarly publications)
T/R patterns	<p>T/R average: 0.12</p> <p>Growth/growth: 1988–1990</p> <p>Growth/decline: 1990–1993</p> <p>Decline/growth: 1996–1998</p>	<p>T/R average: 0.33</p> <p>Growth/growth: 1992–1995 (scholarly)</p> <p>Growth/decline: 1999–2002</p>	<p>T/R average: 0.27</p> <p>Growth/decline: 1990–2001</p>	<p>T/R average: 0.24</p> <p>Decline/decline: 1995–1999</p>

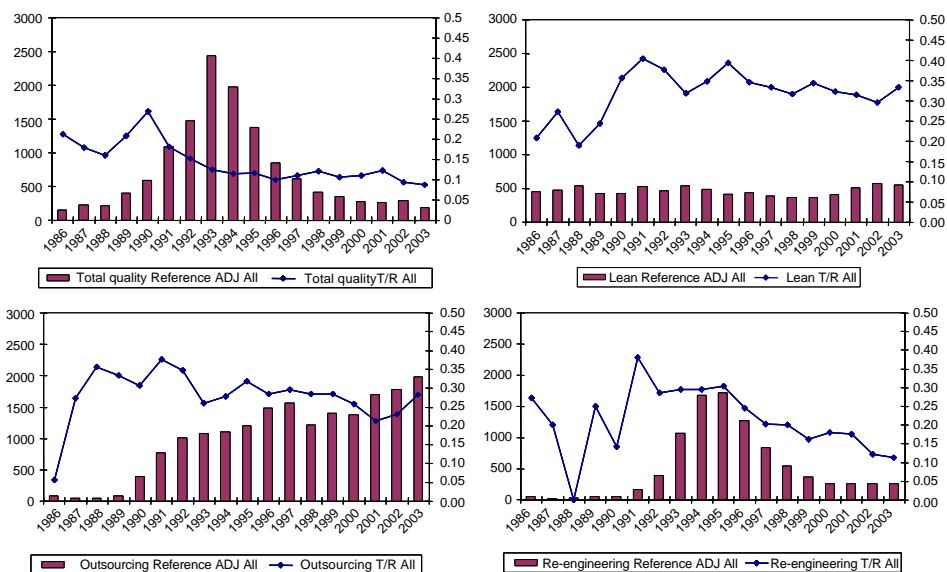


Fig. 2. Adjusted frequency data (numbers of articles, left hand scale) and T/R scores (right hand scale) for Total Quality, Lean, Outsourcing and Re-engineering.

Figs. 3 and 4 show the frequency data broken down over the different publication types. At first sight, clear differences exist between the three media. On a basis of the absolute numbers given in Fig. 3, non-scholarly journals seem to be most affected by the typical bell-shaped fashion pattern regarding Total Quality and Re-engineering. In general, only quite a small number of articles referring to popular concepts seem to have been published in scholarly journals and business newspapers. However, when it comes to references to the two concepts Total Quality and Re-engineering the absolute number of scholarly articles at least equals (and in the case of Total Quality clearly exceeds) the number of non-scholarly articles towards the end of the decline phase.

The picture changes when we look at the relative incidences in Fig. 4. Over the whole fashion cycle, the weight (within the ensemble of articles in each publication type) of Total Quality and of Re-engineering is clearly higher for the scholarly than for the non-scholarly outlets. Whereas the business-newspaper incidence is extremely low for both Total Quality and Re-engineering is extremely low compared to their incidence in scholarly and non-scholarly journals, the incidence levels for both Lean and Outsourcing are much more nearly comparable in all three publication types. It seems surprising at first sight that these two groups of concepts (Total Quality and Re-engineering on the one hand, and Lean and Outsourcing on the other) exhibit such a different pattern of coverage in the different types of publication.

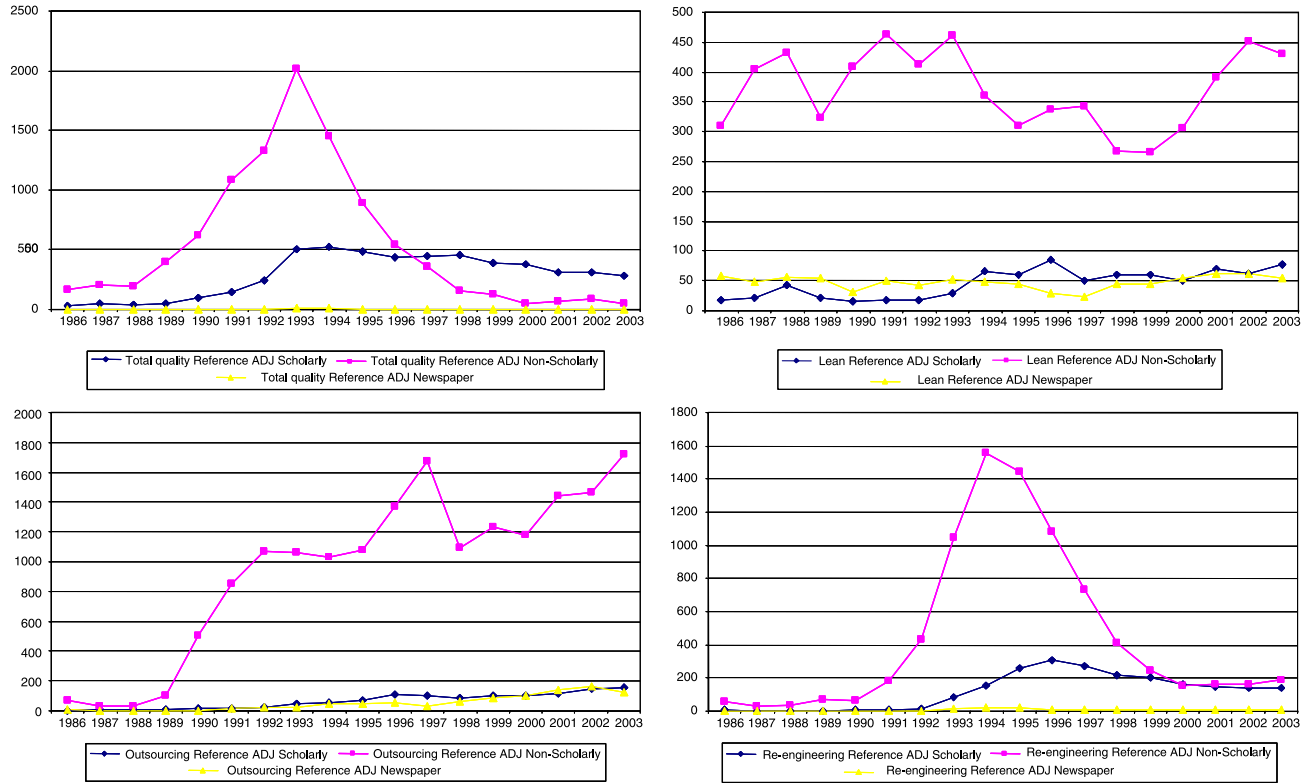


Fig. 3. Adjusted frequency data (numbers of articles) for scholarly publications, non-scholarly publications and business newspapers.

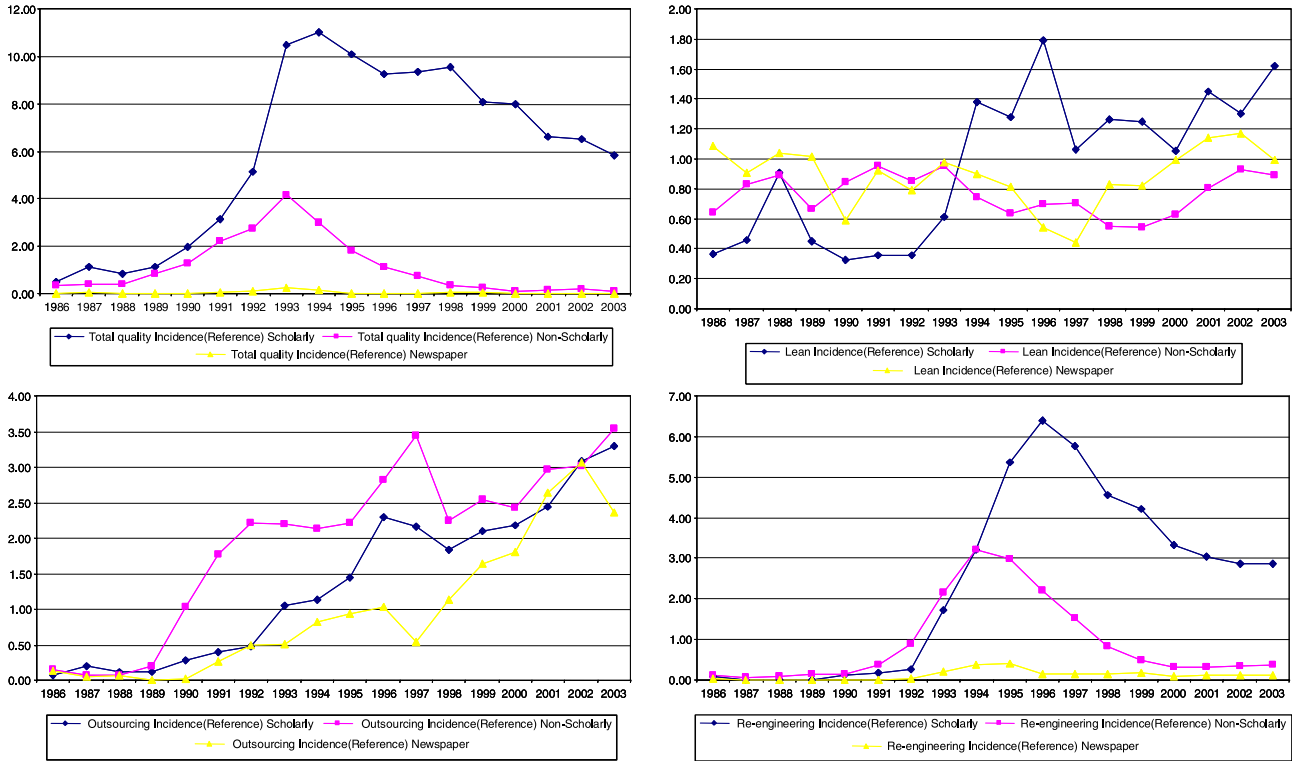


Fig. 4. Incidence (number of articles/1000) for scholarly publications, non-scholarly publications and business newspapers.

3.3. Time lags

It is claimed in some of the literature on the diffusion of popular management knowledge that academic journals tend to lag behind the more practitioner oriented publications (e.g. Spell, 1999, 2001). The absolute numbers in Fig. 3 seem to corroborate this view. In the case of Total Quality, Outsourcing and Re-engineering, the growth in the popularity of the concepts in the non-scholarly publications seems to precede their growth in the scholarly media. For Total Quality, for example, academic articles seem to lag behind the more practitioner-oriented literature: whereas growth in the popularity of this idea starts in the non-scholarly publications in 1989, there does not seem to be any great increase in the number of articles until 1990/1991. However, the incidence scores in Fig. 4 indicate that the relatively modest absolute growth in the number of scholarly articles referring to Total Quality in fact masks a more spectacular increase in their incidence measured in relative terms. In other words, the large difference in the total number of articles between scholarly and non-scholarly journals gives a misleading impression of the actual diffusion dynamics of the concept in the realm of scholarly publications.

The incidence data displayed in Fig. 4 gives us cause to question the time lag argument. The graph for Total Quality shows a parallel development for the popularity of the concept in the scholarly and non-scholarly publications, together with its noticeable absence from the business newspapers. The main differences between the frequency patterns in the scholarly and non-scholarly publications lie in the magnitude of the incidence in two outlets and, on the “decline” side, in the fact that the incidence of the concept declines much more slowly in the scholarly than in the non-scholarly journals.

The findings for Re-engineering resemble those for Total Quality: absence of coverage in the business newspapers (in absolute and relative terms), high incidence in scholarly publications together with a relatively slow decline. In the case of Re-engineering, however, a time lag of roughly 1–2 years appears to exist for both the “takeoff” and the culmination of the fashion cycle between the scholarly and non-scholarly publications. In terms of timing, the slight reflection of the overall Re-engineering hype in the business newspapers corresponds to the visible pattern for the non-scholarly publications.

The data regarding Lean present a completely different picture, with big fluctuations in all three types of publication, but without any evident fashion cycle or any clear signs of time lag. However, between 1993 and 1996 the incidence of the concept increases in the scholarly publications, while at the same time its incidence in non-scholarly publications and business newspapers drops. Here, it could be argued that the increase in scholarly articles reflects the earlier height of the interest on the practitioners’ side. The incidence of Lean in the business newspapers is relatively high and seems to parallel the incidence scores for non-scholarly publications.

Outsourcing is dominated in absolute terms by contributions in non-scholarly publications. The incidence scores in Fig. 4 reveal a similar progression in terms of weight for all three outlets. In the case of Outsourcing, the interest in non-scholarly publications in the 1989–1992 period clearly exceeds the development of the concept

		'References' score	
		growth	decline
<i>T/R ratio</i>	growth	distinction/ promotion	isolation/ concentration
	decline	generalization/ naturalization	oblivion

Fig. 5. Publication dynamics.

in the scholarly publications. In terms of incidence, business newspapers lag even further behind, with the biggest increase between 1997 and 2001. One remarkable feature of the Outsourcing data is a drop in the incidence of the concept between 1996 and 1998 that occurs in all three publication types at about the same time.

3.4. Publication dynamics

A third set of observations deriving from the publication data concerns the relation between T/R ratios and the overall number of articles for the four management concepts (see Fig. 2). If we consider the T/R ratio as an indicator of the distinctive capacity of a management idea, we can combine growing and declining T/R scores with growing and declining overall article counts to yield a two-by-two matrix to identify some general dynamics concerning the use of management ideas in the business press (see Fig. 5). The four following constellations can be seen in the data: (1) a growing overall number of articles together with a growing T/R ratio (e.g. Total Quality 1988–1990; Lean 1992–1995 (scholarly publications)); (2) a growing overall number of articles combined with a declining T/R ratio (e.g. Total Quality 1990–1993; Outsourcing 1991–2000); (3) a declining overall number of articles with a slightly increasing T/R ratio (e.g. Total Quality 1996–1998); and (4) a declining overall number of articles combined with a declining T/R ratio (e.g. Re-engineering 1995–1999).

3.4.1. Growth/growth

The first case combines a growing T/R ratio with a growing overall number of articles that refer to a concept. This means that the total number of articles referring to a given concept increases at the same time as the proportion of the articles using the concept in their titles. This results in an over-proportional increase of the presence of the concept based on the increasing number of its appearances in titles. A growth/growth constellation could indicate a phase of growing popularity for a

concept marked by a very dynamic spread due to the fact that the concept has the capacity to grant distinctiveness, or to serve as a visible marker for adherence to a particular conceptual innovation. In other words, it indicates an increasingly *active* use in the business press of the concept in order to signal distinctiveness relative to earlier concepts and/or its conformity with a presumed elite or avant-garde.

3.4.2. *Growth/decline*

The growth/decline combination represents a pattern in which the number of articles referring to a management concept rises while the proportion of the articles that refer to the concept in their titles declines. This situation can be interpreted as follows. Over time, the number of articles mentioning the concept rises. At the same time, a growing number of articles do not deal directly or uniquely with just that concept, which is now increasingly used to introduce, relate to or discuss other ideas. It undergoes a kind of “naturalization” whereby it becomes part of an accepted and agreed-on repertoire of business knowledge. Overall, this pattern indicates a growing but not distinction-making use of the concept in the business press. A good example of this pattern can be found in the development of Total Quality 1990–1993. During this period the total number of references rose from 588 to 2440, but the *T/R* ratio fell from 27 to 12 per cent. This could mean that Total Quality had become increasingly widely accepted, implying a set of general and consequently less specific management techniques.

3.4.3. *Decline/growth*

The third pattern combines a rising *T/R* ratio with a falling total number of references. Such a pattern could indicate a loss of broad public interest combined with an increase in the share of specialized articles that strive for some evident association with the concept. Another interpretation could be that a concept has reached a point of saturation due to generalization. From this point on, authors would try to reconsider and redefine (“What Total Quality Management really is...”), or to review the concept in question more critically. In the data presented here, this pattern appears only for Total Quality in the 1996–1998 period.

3.4.4. *Decline/decline*

The fourth constellation combines a declining overall number of articles with a declining *T/R* ratio. The drop in the number of references, together with the proportion of articles using the concept in their titles, signifies an over-proportional loss in the visibility of the concept. In the data, this pattern is clearly visible for Re-engineering between 1995 and 2003. Decline/decline could indicate that a concept is “fading out” and being replaced by others.

Table 1 summarizes the principal findings as regards overall frequency patterns, time lags and publication dynamics.

4. Discussion and conclusion

What can be learned from the observations presented above about popular management concepts and the business press? The publication data hint at the existence of different publication logics and academic-practitioner dynamics referring to the different management concepts. For the management ideas whose overall frequency pattern comes closest to the ideal-typical management fad characterized by a bell-shaped frequency curve (in our case Total Quality and Re-engineering), the highest incidence and the slowest decline occur in connection with scholarly publications. There are two reasons for this: the rapid decline in faddish ideas in the popular press is connected with the relatively rapid exhaustion of the rhetoric and the bold promises that have enabled the concept to gain popularity in the first place (Gill & Whittle, 1992). This could be associated with the longer duration of (empirical) academic work and the publishing time lag in peer reviewed journals. Scholarly research and publications do not necessarily contribute to the actual development of a popular idea, but often adopt the “meta” stance of writing about an idea, its application, rhetoric, etc. Conversely, it could also be argued that managerial practice is inherently more fluid and more readily embraces new ideas, which puts a pressure on the popular management press to present new and attractively packaged ideas that are ready for consumption. It is clear, however, that the field of business research is prone to its own fashion dynamics, and that these could be even stronger than those witnessed in the realm of management practice. The data presented above suggest that the tendency to focus on a set of particular themes or concepts at one point in time may be stronger in scholarly than in non-scholarly publications.

Compared with Lean and Outsourcing, where the incidence is of comparable magnitude in all three publication types, Total Quality and Re-engineering seem sharply underrepresented in business newspapers. From this, one might conclude that business newspapers do not actually play a major role in the diffusion of faddish management ideas. Superficially, this seems to contradict the claim that the mass media play an ever more important role in the legitimization of management ideas (Mazza & Alvarez, 2000). However, I do not think there is a contradiction in this case. If it is true that the coverage of management ideas in the business newspapers provides an adequate reflection of actual company practices, then the coverage gap between the newspapers and the more specialized media would merely represent the share in the overall game that is made up of fancy rhetoric and “hot air”. On the other hand, one would also expect business newspapers, whose natural *raison d'être* is to spread news, i.e. concrete and timely information about companies and deals, to refrain from too extensive general a coverage of broader, more conceptual management ideas. This is corroborated by the observation that business newspapers actually do talk about Outsourcing and Lean, two ideas for which (due to the openness and connectivity of the concepts) concrete company stories might be more readily at hand.

The pattern differences described above may be connected with different underlying diffusion dynamics. In its early days Total Quality Management was

oriented towards the use of statistics to achieve improvements in the overall quality of products and services. By the time it had exchanged its initial specialist orientation for the sound reputation of being a general management principle adopted by a great many companies as a “logically sustained and plausible proposal for organizational reform” (Ramsay, 1996, p. 157) based on the empowerment of the workforce and a rhetoric of continuous improvement (Scarbrough & Burrell, 1996), the concept was ready to “take off”.

Re-engineering on the other hand is a concept that did not exist at all under this designation before its introduction in the early 1990s. The idea of Re-engineering was first published in 1990 (Hammer, 1990) without making much of a splash, and only became a bestseller with the 1993 publication of Michael Hammer and James Champy’s book “Reengineering the corporation” (Hammer & Champy, 1993). Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996) report that “Reengineering the corporation” had sold “almost two million copies”, and that it had led to the creation of a veritable reengineering industry including follow-up books, “specialized consultancies, endless conferences, dozens of ‘do-it-yourself’ videotapes, and countless courses at business schools” (1996, p. 5). The fact that the authors presented their own work as a radical departure from existent management theory, and its success as a kind of “business revelation”, have in turn provoked management academics to the critical review of its application in management practice (see, for example, Kieser, 1996; Benders, van den Berg, & van Bijsterveld, 1998).

Both Lean and Outsourcing represent concepts that adopt the form of more general management philosophies that, paradoxically, are at the same time much broader in scope *and* easier to attach to a given company reality than concepts that seem to have better defined contours. They serve as more general principles for managerial action and lend themselves easily to association with other concepts and applications. As principles rather than tools, they develop relatively slowly over time and have a tendency to mirror broad and general long-term changes in managerial ideology (Spell, 2001). The stability of references in the case of Lean substantiates Spell’s (1999) claim that older concepts can maintain a steady-state level for decades after their emergence. A similar idea was advanced by Carson, Lanier, Carson, and Birkenmeier (1999), where it is claimed that fads may evolve into trends or collective wisdom. Finally, the patterns whereby management ideas develop can be affected by competing fashions. Re-engineering is a challenge to Total Quality (Abrahamson, 1996), as Knowledge Management is to Organizational Learning. An earlier study has argued that some concepts persist visibly due to a process of “piggybacking”, whereby novel management ideas are introduced as extensions or further developments of previous ones (Raub & Rüling, 2001). Competition and open confrontation among concepts seem to be rare. It seems that legitimacy for a novel management idea can be more easily built up by positively embracing instead of criticizing existing concepts.

These analyses open several avenues for further research. First, while article counts can provide a good overview of the general development of a given set of ideas, they reveal their limitations when it comes to understanding the internal dynamics of the production, diffusion/translation and consumption of popular

management knowledge. Consequently, article counts and bibliometric evidence can at best provide one piece of the overall mosaic. On the macro-level, more detailed analyses are necessary to develop our understanding of the differences in the diffusion dynamics of popular management knowledge. Research on diffusion patterns should be combined with more micro-level studies that look at editorial choices and decision-making in different kinds of business media. Last but not least, research has to explore the way actors make sense out of the unfolding fashion dynamics that confront them, and the way these same actors craft their individual strategies around popular knowledge, various outlets, and the notions of risk, identity, definitional power, and legitimacy.

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