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Handling management ideas: Gatekeeping, editors and professional magazines



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Summary While business media are important in the transfer of management ideas, there has been little attention to the question how media-internal processes shape the way the media address these ideas. Our study shows how editorial norms and routines at professional magazines interact with external pressures to produce a unique process of gatekeeping management ideas. Our findings show that editors' perceptions of an idea's newsworthiness are vital in gatekeeping. Nonetheless, the role of the media in the dissemination of management ideas is critically dependent on resource constraints and the related influence of external authors and advertisers. Whereas resource-rich magazines can follow a logic of autonomy and independence, magazines with fewer resources are more inclined to collude with management intellectuals, consulting firms and advertisers to create interest in certain management ideas.

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Introduction

A growing literature addresses the population-level diffusion and organizational-level handling of 'management ideas' (Sturdy, 2004; Røvik, 2011). This field of study has paid particular attention to the actors engaged in the production side of the market for management ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997), such as consulting firms, management gurus and business media (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). For instance, studies have

highlighted how consulting firms develop new products and services around promising ideas (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2005; Kieser, 2002). Work on management gurus has focused on how they convince and attract audiences through public performances and production of management bestsellers (Clark & Greatbatch, 2004; Clark & Salaman, 1998; Greatbatch & Clark, 2003).

As for the business media, various studies have highlighted how their attention to popular management ideas, measured by article counts, tends to display bell-shaped curves (Carson, Lanier, Carson, & Guidry, 2000). As such, media output is often understood as an empirical means to visualize the notion that management ideas can be subject to a fashion lifecycle (Abrahamson, 1996; Benders, Nijholt, & Heusinkveld, 2007; Gill & Whittle, 1993). Also, an important stream of research has developed our understanding of the role of

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the media in the production and dissemination of management ideas (Mazza & Alvarez, 2000; Rüling, 2005). Abrahamson (1996), citing Hirsch (1972), suggests that business media form an important 'strategic checkpoint' for producers of management ideas, since they perform a gatekeeping role (Hirsch, 1972, p. 643) which may block or facilitate the further dissemination of ideas. To date, research has offered few details about *how* business media perform this gatekeeping role, beyond the statement that it is likely that the media play 'principally cooperative games' (Kieser, 1997, p. 57), with other management fashion-setters seeking publicity. This gives rise to a view of the business media as relatively compliant and accommodating mouthpieces for 'fashion-setters' such as consultants, gurus, or professional associations invested in the successful diffusion of particular ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Ax & Bjørnenak, 2005; Swan, Newell, & Robertson, 1999; Swan & Newell, 1995). Insights from the field of media sociology, however, suggest that such a view is starkly at odds with the professional norms of the news media (cf. Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 33) where integrity and independence from owners, advertisers and sources appear to be highly valued.

Given a lack of empirical and theoretical attention to the production of business media contents, we need better insight into how processes within the media shape the way in which they relate to management ideas. Rüling, for instance, has emphasized the importance of conducting micro-level studies that "look at editorial choices and decision making" (2005, p. 193). This is against the backdrop of a more generally expressed need for finer-grained conceptualizations of backstage processes in the production and dissemination of management ideas (Clark, 2004; Clark & Greatbatch, 2004). Gaining further insight into the production of media content is not only important because the business media can 'draw widespread attention to progressive management rhetorics championing particular management techniques' (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 269), but also because they influence corporate agendas (Carroll, 2010) and can define, frame and (de)legitimate events and corporate activities (Grafstrom & Windell, 2011; Hellgren et al., 2002; Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006; Vergne, 2011; Zavylova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012).

In this paper, we aim to address this gap in our understanding by reporting on a qualitative study of editorial processes in business media. Our study focuses on *professional magazines*. These practitioner-oriented magazines aim to inform targeted professional groups on managerial topics and form a recognizable category of publications in the field of business media (Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988; Raub & Rüling, 2001). While earlier work has addressed the role of professions in the diffusion and legitimation of management knowledge, the role of editorial processes at these associated professional magazines has not been studied (Ax & Bjørnenak, 2005; Frenkel, 2005; Raub & Rüling, 2001; Scarbrough, Robertson, & Swan, 2005; Shenhav, 1999; Swan et al., 1999; Swan & Newell, 1995). With a typical publication frequency of once a month and clearly delineated audiences, these magazines are a type of publication distinct from daily, mass-oriented business newspapers or scholarly journals (Barley et al., 1988). Professional magazines have been shown to contribute by far the largest proportion of print media output on popular ideas (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Heusinkveld

& Benders, 2001), making them an especially salient context for this study.

In studying editorial decisions, we draw on a media sociology perspective (Schudson, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), and in particular on the notion of gatekeeping (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1972; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; White, 1950). The professional magazines central to our study are not among the traditional 'news organizations' generally studied in the field of media sociology, whose business is to deliver highly topical event-driven news to mass audiences. Nonetheless, both these categories of media are engaged in the production of symbolic content (Hirsch, 1972), and as such our analysis is informed by the literature on news gatekeeping. Specifically, we use existing insights into the role of norms, organizational routines and field-level pressures in news selection (Boyle, 2001; Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Hjarvard, 2008; Tuchman, 1973). By drawing insights from this tradition and applying them to our current empirical setting of professional magazines, we show how editorial norms and routines at professional magazines interact with the specific pressures in this distinct organizational field, resulting in a unique process of gatekeeping management ideas.

Building on these results, our study makes three contributions. First, prior work on management fashions has assumed a 'principally cooperative' role of business media with respect to other management fashion-setters (Abrahamson, 1996; Carson et al., 2000; Kieser, 1997). Such a depiction of the role of the business media fits a parsimonious description of 'management fashion setters' but has also led to a simplified understanding of how and why ideas are processed by these media. Drawing from existing theory on news organizations in our exploration of professional magazines, the present study extends prior research by showing that applications of the norms of newsworthiness are subject to specific tensions which stem from attempts to reconcile these invariant norms with the interests of various knowledge entrepreneurs. Second, our study provides a more comprehensive view of how processes of gatekeeping in relation to management ideas may vary, as it identifies different ways in which editors seek to address these tensions and by showing how these are systematically associated with magazine resource constraints. Third, our research furthers insight into the possibilities and limitations of the use of business media data in studying the prevalence and longevity of particular ideas, emphasizing the need for greater sensibility to the editorial processes that shape media content.

Theory

Business media and management ideas

To date, two central approaches can be distinguished in the research on the role of business media in relation to the production, dissemination and popularity of management ideas. The first significant approach can be subsumed under the rubric of management fashion research. This line of research focuses on variations over time in the volume of media output, as measured by article counts, thereby considering business media primarily as an empirical means to study the evolving popularity of particular ideas (see, for

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