

Knowledge Management, An Enduring but Confusing Fashion

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Abstract: Knowledge Management has been a subject of significant management interest for some 15 years. During that time it has been subjected to a variety of criticisms including the argument that it is little more than a “fad” -- something that catches management’s attention for a while and then fades away because of a lack of sustainability. It has been compared to other major management fads such as quality circles and business process re-engineering. This paper examines the discipline of Knowledge Management (KM) through the lens of management fashion theory. It demonstrates that KM is not a fad and that it has become an enduring management activity. Management Fashion Theory (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999) is an extension of Rogers’ Theory of Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003), that takes a skeptical view of business innovations, viewing the discourse about and the diffusion of innovations as a cultural phenomenon rather than a rational decision making process. After a brief introduction to the field of Knowledge Management (KM), a review of the theories of Diffusion of Innovations and Management Fashion is presented, along with a description of the methodology used to apply Management Fashion Theory to the discourse on KM. Bibliometric and content analysis techniques are used to examine publications and discourse in the field from 1990 to 2009. The analysis of discourse on KM demonstrates a significant period of “latency” from the late 1980s to 1994, during which foundational ideas and precursors to KM appear. Then a rapid growth period is identified, from 1995-2001 during which KM becomes an innovation of interest to most major organizations. Finally, it appears that discourse has settled at a steady state, with no decline apparent. However, detailed analysis has also identified a potential conflict between the interests of practitioners and researchers, with a separation of the discourse into distinct groups that may have inconsistent views on what is or is not “Knowledge Management”. In summary, this paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of discourse on KM. It provides bibliometric evidence that there has been a sustained interest in KM that is quite unlike that of other popular management themes over the last 30 years. It raises some questions about the relevance of some of the research being carried out.

Keywords: management fashion, innovation diffusion, bibliometric analysis, KM strategy

1. Introduction

The first decade of KM has been succinctly summarised by J-C Spender (2005), who observed that:

The most obvious news is that knowledge management (KM) has become big business, growing explosively since Drucker drew attention to it in 1988 (Drucker, 1988). We now see KM conferences all over the world, a huge number of KM trade journals, and battalions of KM consultants. The majority of organizations, both private and public, have KM projects of various types and their spending is enormous...There has been a parallel growth of academic discussion about knowledge.

He then goes on to say, “As KM has risen in importance and managerial fashionability the hype and confusion has multiplied, leading some to argue that KM is a fad of little long-term significance.”

Wilson (2002) claims that KM is, “in large part, a management fad, promulgated mainly by certain consultancy companies, and the probability is that it will fade away like previous fads.” This has led to other authors to apply a more formal framework to assess the fad/fashion phenomenon, with Scarbrough & Swan (2001) and Ponzi & Koenig (2002), both drawing on the work of Abrahamson (1999), to suggest that KM might be passing from a fad to something more enduring.

2. Background

The effective use of knowledge is often argued to be key to competitive success in the global economy of the 21st century. Not only is the effective management of knowledge argued to be a critical element of the innovations needed to be successful, Knowledge Management is, of itself, a major “innovation”.

One approach frequently used to examine management decisions to adopt new innovations is the Theory of Diffusion of Innovations, initially developed by Rogers in the 1960s (Rogers, 2003) and drawing on widespread studies of promotion and adoption of agricultural innovations. For Rogers, “an innovation is an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of

adoption” and “diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system”. The participant in the innovation decision can be an individual or an organization. Over time, a successful innovation is adopted by a high proportion of its target population, with several stages of adoption. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of adoption.

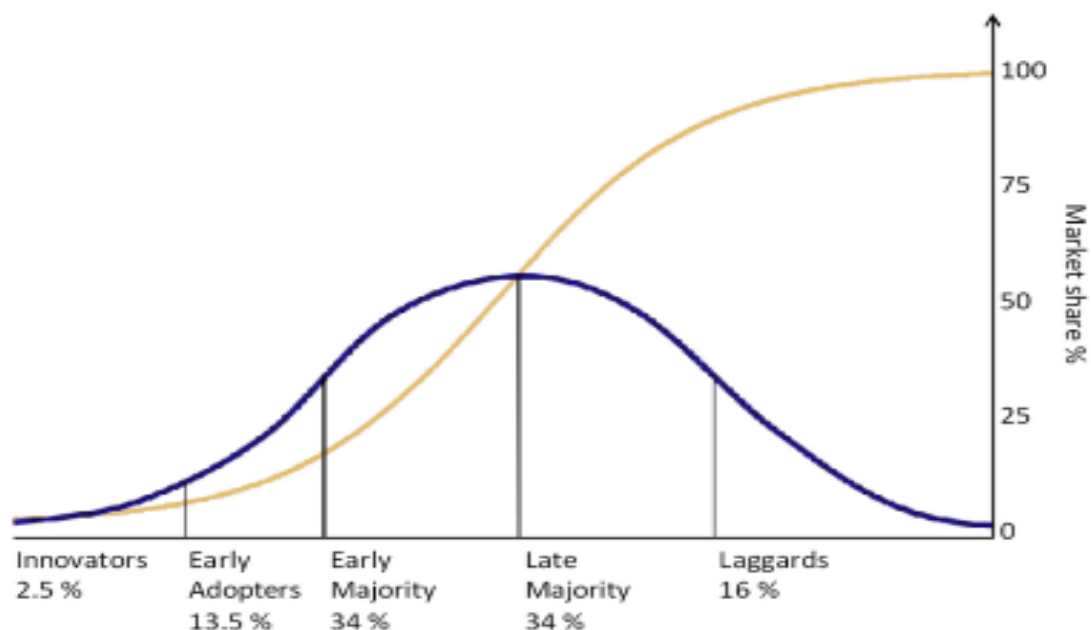


Figure 1: A successful innovation adoption (from Rogers, 2003)

Abrahamson (1991), however, argues that the management innovation-diffusion literature is dominated by a perspective that assumes that rational adopters make independent and technically efficient choices and he suggests that, frequently, this is not the case. He goes on to propose that the diffusion of “innovative administrative technologies” (prescriptions for designing organizational structures and cultures) can often be described as management fads or fashions.

Thus, management fashion is “largely a cultural phenomenon, shaped by norms of rationality” (i.e. sets of behaviours that are believed to be rational by a particular stakeholder group) and expectations of progress (i.e. management must be seen to be always looking for improvement) (Abrahamson, 1996). This steady user demand for new management fashions is met by a supply of new ideas promoted by management fashion setters. These fashion setters may “invent, rediscover or reinvent the management technique they attempt to launch into fashion”. The underlying expectation is that, over time, the use of a specific management fashion will eventually decline and new fashions must emerge to meet the demand for innovative ideas. Specific versions of the Fashion S-curve have been developed to show this expectation that a management fashion is typically “characterised by a long latency phase followed by a wave-like, often asymmetrical and ephemeral popularity curve” (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999).

Figure 2 illustrates the general argument. Following an, often extended, period of latency, where initial concepts are formulated but do not receive widespread attention, some trigger (this can be exogenous or endogenous to the field) drives a period of rapid growth in popularity, followed by a period of widespread use and then a period of decline. During this period of decline the management fashion may be subject to a re-examination and redefinition that may then act as a trigger for a new a wave of popularity.

As a result, some fashions can achieve widespread adoption and continued use for a considerable period of time. Others will decline quite quickly and these are considered to be “fads”. Finally, in a given subject area during a period of decline, a redefinition can take place and multiple cycles or generations of innovation are visible where, as one proposed approach declines, fashion setters introduce a new innovation.

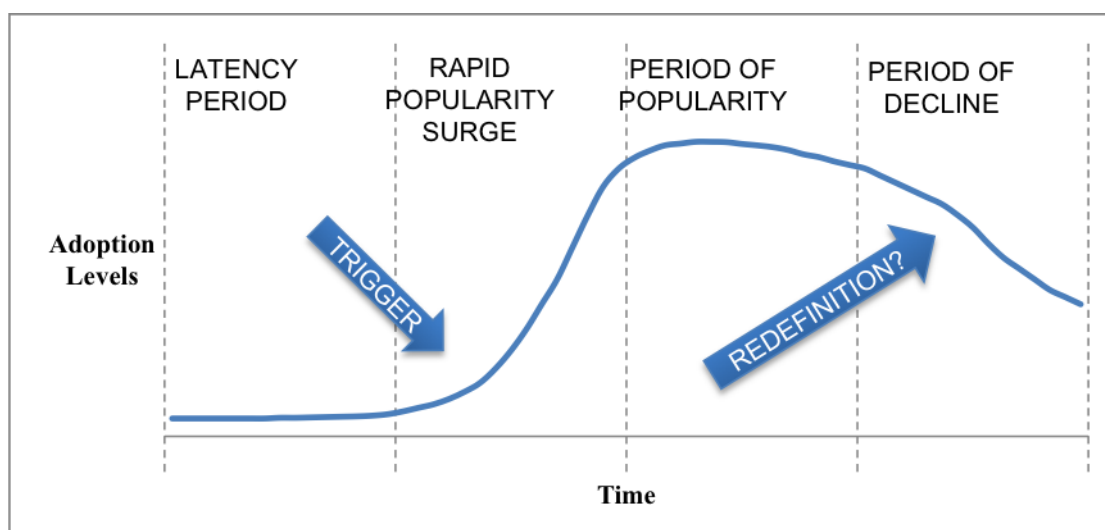


Figure 2: The management fashion cycle (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999)

Of particular importance in the supply of management fashion is the role of the "management guru." Huczynski (1993) describes three kinds of management guru:

- The **Academic** Guru: An academic from a major educational institution, who has developed and popularized his or her ideas on some aspect of management. Examples include Michael Porter, Henry Mintzberg and Kenneth Blanchard.
- The **Consultant** Guru: Senior professionals and prestigious firms who have established a reputation for creative insight and extensive experience in particular fields. Examples include Peters and Waterman, W Edwards Deming, Peter Drucker and the consulting firms of McKinsey or BCG.
- The **Hero-Manager** Guru: A senior executive who has committed their thoughts to print, either directly or through a biographer, and whose authority comes from apparent success. Examples include Lee Iacocca, Jack Welch and Donald Trump.

Specifically, Collins (2000), in his critical examination of management fads and buzzwords, argues that the work of gurus constitutes a "ready-made science of management" that, given its influence on business decisions, must be exposed to critical review. Carson et al comment that "clearly there are some negative connotations associated with the word. Many fashion setters, such as consultants, would object to the label "fad" being associated with their intervention. (Carson et al., 1999)

Between 1996 and 2010, at least 21 studies of management fashion have been carried out, examining 32 different management topics, including Business Process Re-engineering and Quality Management. In the vast majority of cases a period of latency (perhaps 5 years or more) is followed by a rapid growth in popularity (typically from 3-5 years) with a very short peak (sometimes for as little as 1 year) and then a steady decline in interest to a much lower steady state (over a 5- 7 year period). The typical complete cycle of a management fashion seems to be in the 10-15 year range.

3. Analysis

3.1 Methodology

Abrahamson & Fairchild (1999) distinguish between the discourse about a fashion and the actual use of the fashion and recommend that management fashions can be studied by examining two parallel life cycles – the evolution of the discourse surrounding the innovation and the degree to which the innovation is actually adopted for continued use (its diffusion):

Discourse life-cycle analysis is an approach used to examine the volume and nature of discourse about a particular fashion over time. This is typically done by bibliographic and content analysis, separating the various modes of discourse -- mass media, Internet, trade/business press, academic press (journals and dissertations). This use of the term "discourse" is quite distinct from the post modernist theories of Discourse Analysis (see, for example: Brown and Yule, 2003).

Diffusion life-cycle analysis is an approach used to determine the degree to which an innovation is actually adopted by organizations (fashion followers) and the level of use over time. Depending on the nature of the innovation, this can be done through surveys, case studies or analysis of secondary data, such as growth/decline in the businesses of service or product suppliers and specific market sales data. Of the 21 management fashion studies reviewed for this research, while all examine the discourse life cycle, only five examine the diffusion, usually by referencing secondary data. This is a significant weakness in the application of management fashion theory, since, from a practitioner viewpoint, it is the diffusion of the innovation that is important, not the discourse.

In this paper, discourse life cycle analysis is used to examine the literature on Knowledge Management. A bibliographic analysis was done using the online *ProQuest Research Library Complete*, which provides abstracts, indexing and full text for more than 1,800 titles from academic journals, popular magazines, business publications and newspapers and allows a separation of sources.

3.2 An initial analysis of KM discourse since 1990

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw some pioneering efforts that led to the concept of KM emerging as a distinct recognizable discipline by the mid-to late 1990s. Figure 3 shows the results of a search for the term "knowledge management" on the ProQuest online database in April 2010, producing almost 25,000 citations. (To set this in context, similar searches for "business process reengineering" and "quality circles" produced 9,336 and 2,361 citations respectively.) Visual inspection of the graph presented suggests that a period of latency continued to about 1995, followed by a rapid growth from 1995 to 2001 and then a decade of consistent interest at about 2,000 citations per year.¹

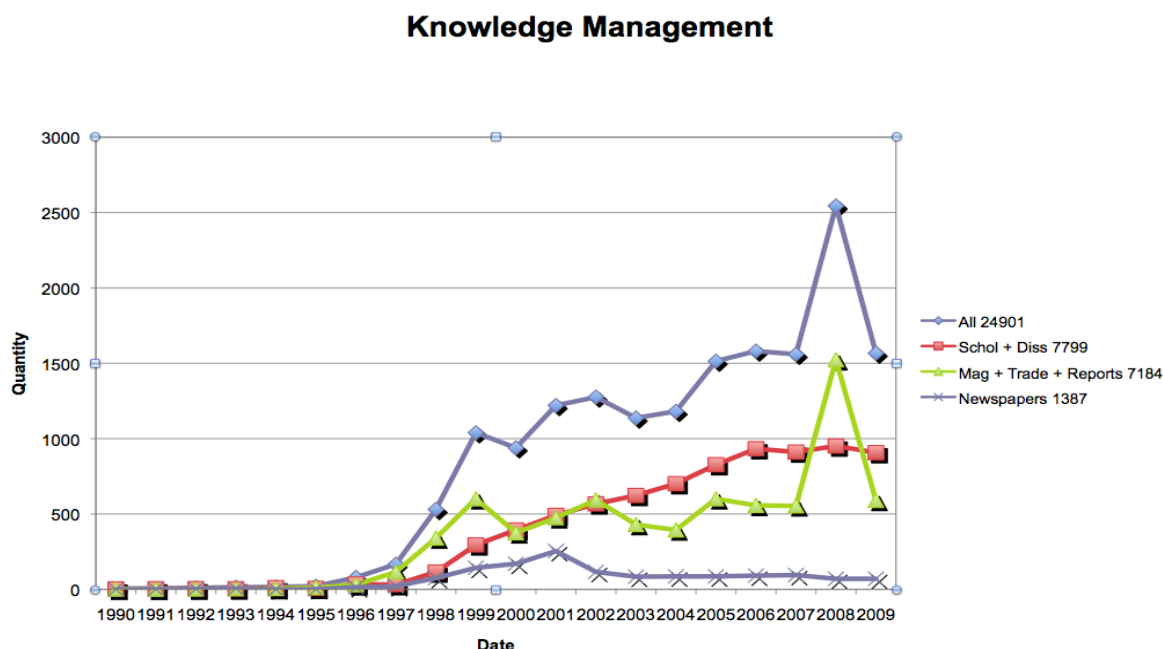


Figure 3: KM discourse analysis 1990-2009, search term "Knowledge Management"

The graph plots suggest that popular interest, as demonstrated by newspaper articles, peaked in 2001 and has since declined. Discourse within industry sources initially exceeded that from academics; however, industry interest has plateaued since about 2001, while academic interest rose steadily until 2006, after which it has also plateaued. This is consistent with Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) description of the management fashion cycle, but with no evidence of any decline. When comparing this with the cycles developed for other management fads and fashions (such as quality circles and business process re-engineering) this indicates a significantly longer period of popularity within the discourse life cycle analysis than has been evident for most of the other proposed innovations that have been described as management fads or fashions in other studies.

¹ Examination of the plot shows a spike in the trade publications in 2008. This is due solely to the inclusion in that year in the ProQuest databases of a set of electronic journals published by NewsRx/Vertical News of Atlanta. These do not represent any significant increase in the discourse and consist largely of multiple listings of trade/industry announcements. A similar spike will be seen in some other graphs presented in this paper.

However, the field of knowledge management can be viewed from a number of different perspectives, each with its own terminology. The next sections of the analysis examine a number of themes within the KM field to determine whether the patterns identified in the overall analysis are consistent or whether there are significant differences in different subject areas.

The themes were developed from a content analysis of major KM publications, including the *Journal of Knowledge Management* and the *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, and are shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Common themes in the KM literature

3.3 Theme 1: The management and exploitation of "intellectual capital"

Perhaps the earliest coherent theme that emerged in the KM field, with some antecedents in the world of economics and innovation (which can be seen, for example, in (Teece, 1986)), is the idea of managing intellectual capital or "knowledge assets." Karl-Erik Sveiby's early work in Sweden, (for example, (Sveiby and Risling, 1986) is seen by many as the beginning of the knowledge management movement and an example of a hero-manager guru, as is Lief Edvinsson, who is widely recognized as the first CKO, appointed by Skandia in 1991. However, wider popularization of the concept likely started with Thomas Stewart's writings in *Fortune* magazine (Stewart, 1991, 1994).

Figure 5 shows the bibliographic discourse analysis from 1990 to 2009, using the search term "intellectual capital" or "intellectual assets".

Inspection of the graph shows the same rapid rise demonstrated earlier for the term "knowledge management" with an extended tool from about 2000 at about 600 citations per year. However, examination of the individual categories indicates that, over the last decade, while there has been a steady increase in discourse within the academic community, industry discourse after a fast peak in 1998, declined to a steady state thereafter.

3.4 Theme 2: Social views of knowledge: Organizational learning and communities of practice

Another early theme was the consideration of learning and knowledge sharing as a social activity. This theme was popularized by Senge, an academic guru, in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990) and evolved from the world of general systems theory.

Much of this work in organizational learning addresses a key challenge -- attempting to define knowledge in a business or organizational context. Thus, while the organizational learning field takes as a given that "knowledge" is learned by both individuals and organizations, it provides quite varied

views on what exactly that knowledge is. This discussion frequently focuses around two linked concepts -- organizational learning and communities.

Intellectual Capital or Intellectual Assets

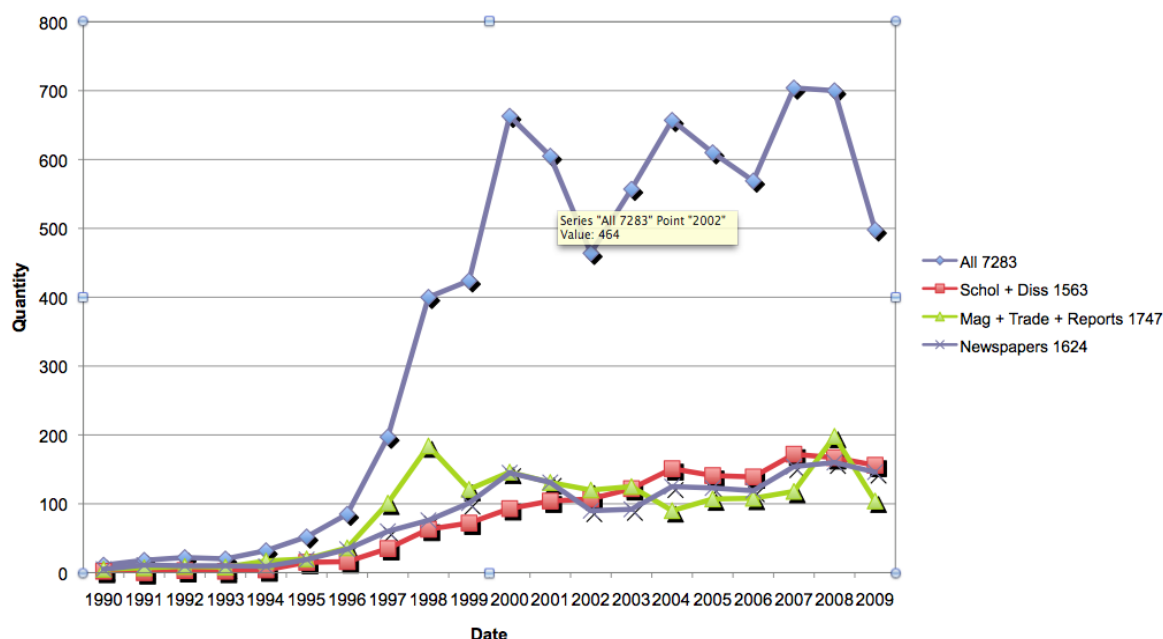


Figure 5: KM discourse analysis 1990-2009, search term “Intellectual Capital’ or ‘Intellectual Asset”

In Figures 6 and 7, the results of two bibliographic searches are presented. The first shows the results of a search for “Organisational Learning” (using both the British and US spelling) and the second looks at “Communities of Practice”.

Organizational Learning

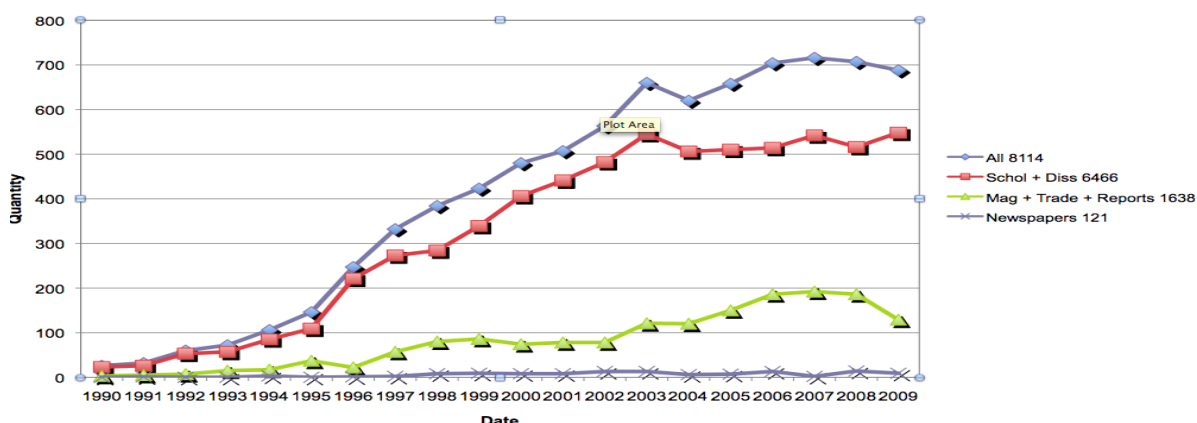


Figure 6: A KM discourse analysis 1990-2009, search terms “Organisational Learning’ or ‘Organizational Learning”

3.5 Theme 3: Knowledge work and knowledge models and processes

Three linked sub-themes have emerged around the concept of knowledge work. One is related to the special situation of the knowledge worker and of knowledge intensive organizations. Another relates to knowledge management models, both conceptual and structural, and a third has evolved around knowledge processes. Each of these is discussed in more detail.

Knowledge Work(ers): The early 1990s saw the beginnings of the examination of the knowledge worker as a specific topic of interest. Peter Drucker, a consultant guru, is often credited with making

the distinction of knowledge-intensive work. As early as 1957, he proposed a new type of worker – the “knowledge worker”

Communities Of Practice

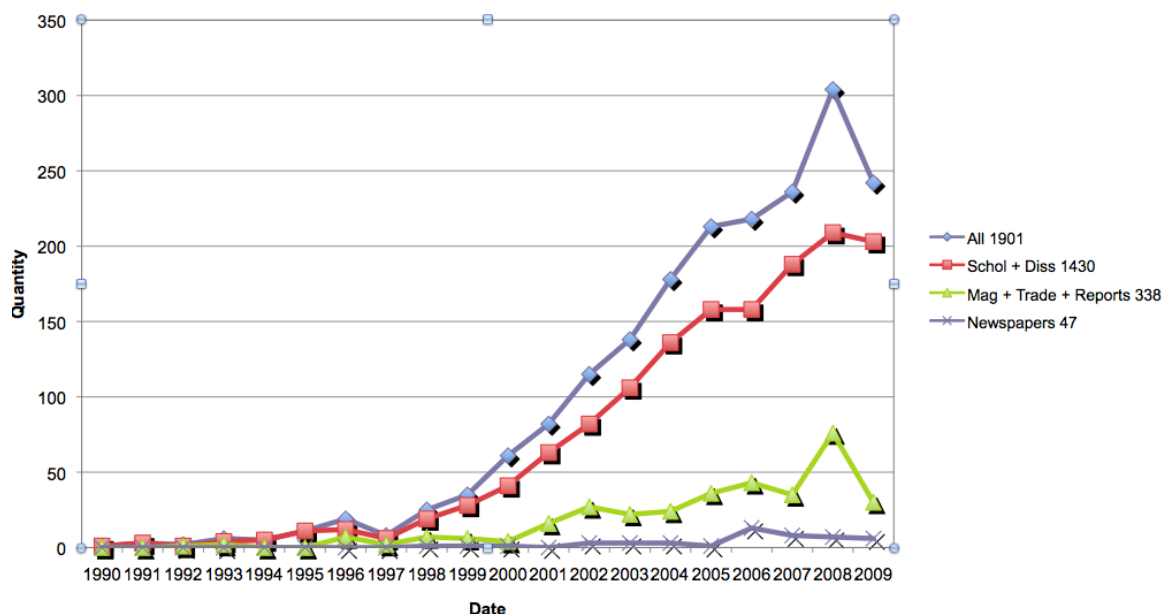


Figure 7: A KM discourse analysis 1990-2009, search term “Communities of Practice”

Figure 8 shows a bibliographic analysis, using the search terms of “Knowledge Management’ and ‘work” or “worker”. Overall, a period of latency till 1996 is followed by a very rapid growth till 1999, followed by a steady state discourse at a fairly low citation level of about 60 per year. Both the academic and industry discourse shows a sustained period of growth before flattening out in the mid to late 2000s.

Knowledge Management And Work(ers)

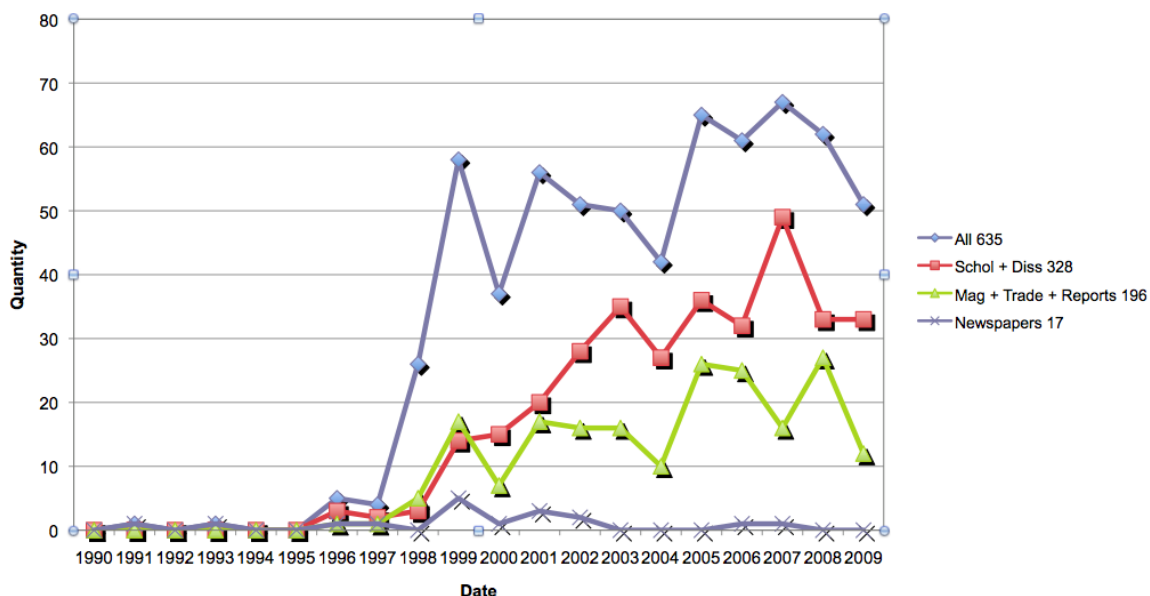


Figure 8: A KM bibliographic analysis 1990-2009, search terms “Knowledge Management’ and ‘Knowledge Work’ or ‘Knowledge Workers”

Knowledge Models: Perhaps the most significant single KM paper published in the 1990s was Ikijiro Nonaka's *The Knowledge-Creating Company* (Nonaka, 1991). Nonaka "corporatized" the tacit/explicit dimension of "personal" knowledge, as originally proposed by Polanyi (1958) and proposed a spiral model for in knowledge creation and transfer which was later formalized by Nonaka (Nonaka, 1994, Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) as the SECI Model (Socialization, Externalization, Internalization, Combination). This model, along with its fundamental assumption that tacit technology can be transferred and can also be converted to explicit knowledge set in a corporate context, is likely the most widely adopted knowledge management concept in KM.

Over the last 15 years or so large number of other knowledge models have been proposed by academics. McAdam and McCreedy (1999) and Kakabadse et al (2003) describe several alternate categories of KM model, including "philosophy-based" models (of which Polanyi's tacit/explicit model is an example), "knowledge category" models such as Nonaka's SECI model and Boisot's I-Space (Information Space), with its six phases of knowledge evolution across the three dimensions of diffusion, abstraction and codification (Boisot, 1999); cognitive" models, often based on intellectual capital or knowledge process themes such as the Skandia IC model (Roos and Roos, 1997) or the Knowledge Life Cycle model of McElroy (1999); and "socially constructed" models of KM, such as that of Demarest (1979), who introduces social interchange processes for the dissemination of knowledge. Figure 9 shows a bibliographic analysis, using the search terms of "Knowledge Management" and "model". Overall, a period of latency till 1997 is followed by a rapid growth till 2006, after which interest seems to plateau at about 300 citations per year, with almost all of the growth and discourse taking place in academic journals. Industry discourse shows relatively little interest in KM models.

Knowledge Management and Model

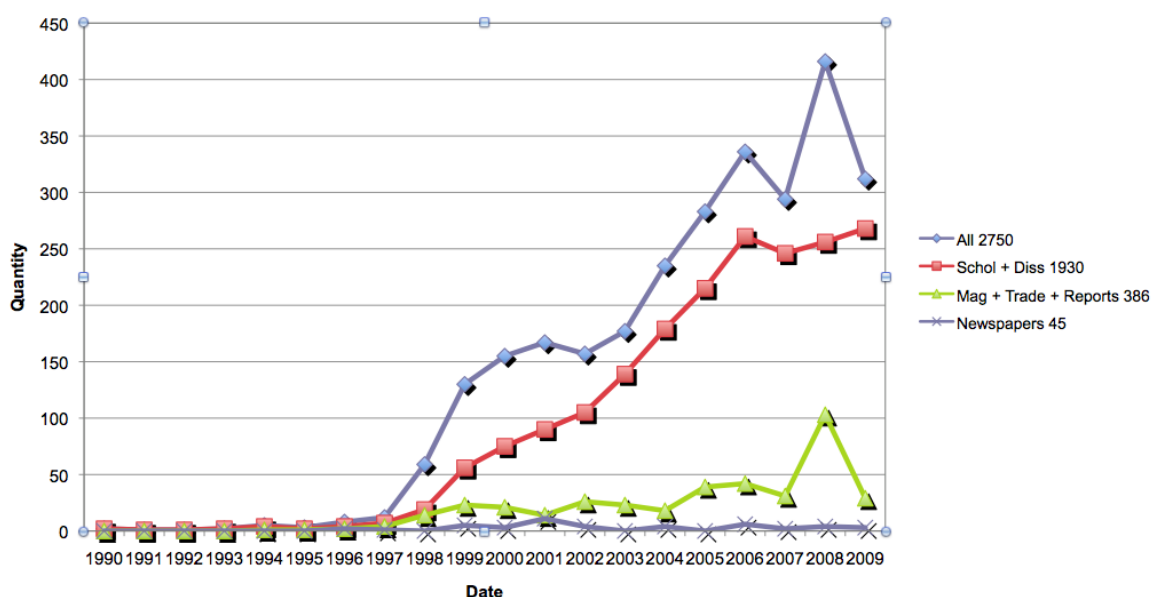


Figure 9: A KM discourse analysis 1990-2009, search terms "Knowledge Management" and "Knowledge Models"

Knowledge Processes: The early 1990s saw a widespread interest in business process reengineering, peaking around the publication of *Reengineering the Corporation* (Hammer and Champy, 1993), along with an increased recognition of the importance of business processes as a primary means of adding value. A number of authors, notably Davenport et al (1996) and Davenport & Prusak in *Working Knowledge* (Davenport and Prusak, 1998) discussed the issues relevant to applying process models to knowledge work, differentiating between processes that apply knowledge and processes intended to create knowledge.

While the work of Davenport & Prusak (one of the most cited sources in the literature) covers a wide range of knowledge management topics, it seems to be most frequently used for its presentation of the roles and uses of information systems as tools to capture, codify and transfer knowledge.

Figure 10 shows a bibliographic analysis, using the search terms of “Knowledge Management’ and ‘Process’”. Overall, a period of latency till 1997 is followed by a very rapid growth till 2001, followed by a steady state at about 600 citations per year. Academic discourse shows a sustained period of growth before flattening out in 2006, while industry discourse flattens out at a lower level by 2002. To some degree, this interest in knowledge processes can be seen as a continuation of the focus on business processes initiated in the BPR fashion of the 1990s, going beyond the cost reduction process work that characterized much of that activity.

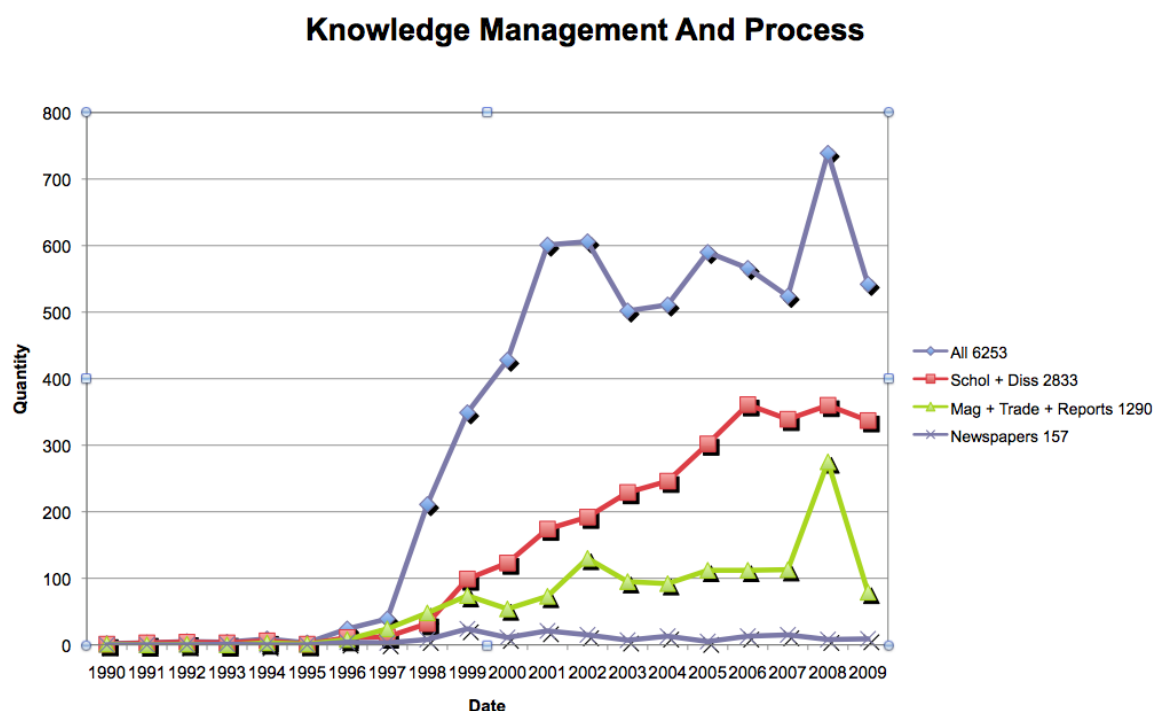


Figure 10: A KM discourse analysis 1990-2009, search terms “Knowledge Management’ and ‘Knowledge Processes’”

3.6 Theme 4: The widespread use of IT to capture, codify and share knowledge

The discussion that concludes the previous section, suggests a long-term association between knowledge activities and information systems. In addition, by the mid-1990s, the evolution of the personal computer and personal computer applications such as word processing, spreadsheets and personal databases had reached a reasonably mature state. Telecommunications and private network applications were pervasive in many organizations, using communications applications such as email and voice mail and newer "groupware" tools such as LotusNotes were being offered to the market.

Figure 11 shows the bibliographic analysis, using the search terms of “Knowledge Management’ and ‘Information Technology’ or ‘System’”. A period of latency till 1997 is followed by a very rapid growth in two years followed by a steady state at about 800 citations per year. Similar levels of interest exist in academic and business sources, although the academic discourse shows a longer period of growth before flattening out. This significant focus on IT within KM can be seen as a bringing together of several factors already discussed. The dramatically increasing capabilities of IT during the growth period proved attractive to organizations that saw knowledge as tangible objects to be stored and retrieved and created a dominant perspective of the conversion of tacit to explicit knowledge, often based on a naïve interpretation of Nonaka’s SECI model.

3.7 Theme 5: The need to manage knowledge activities at both the strategic and operational levels

Starting in the early 1990s, many authors and practitioners were arguing that there was a need for explicit focus on the management of knowledge -- or at least the management of knowledge-related functions and processes within many types of organization. This goes beyond the approaches

suggested in the Intellectual Capital view -- which obviously also includes some management elements.

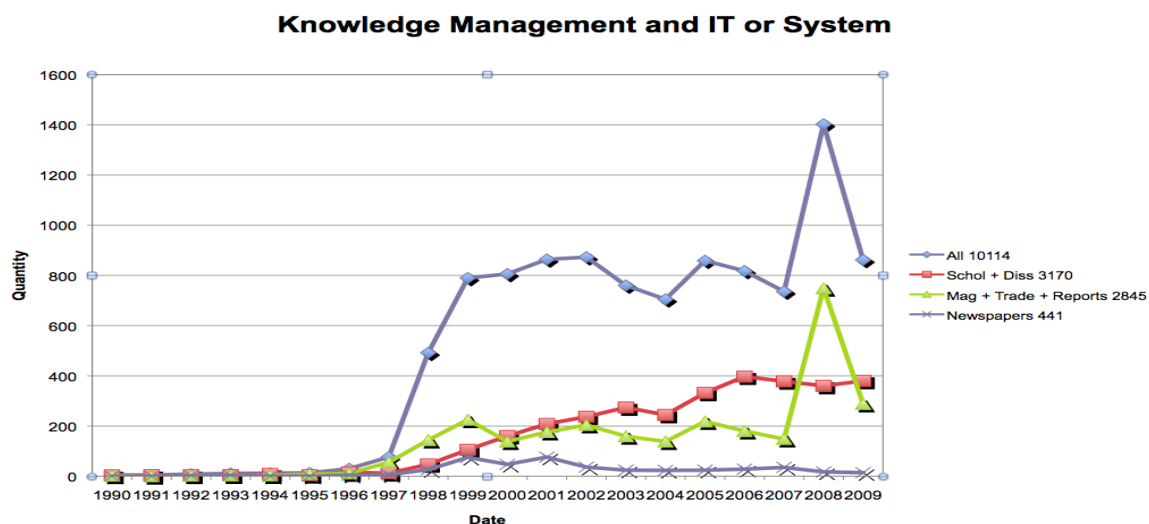


Figure 11: A KM bibliographic analysis 1990-2009, search terms “Knowledge Management’ and ‘information Technology’ or ‘System”

One of the first to look at Knowledge Management as a business practice (and the individual often credited with the first use of the term “knowledge management”) was Karl Wiig, founder of the Knowledge Research Institute, who set out, in a trilogy of books (Wiig, K., 1993, 1994, Wiig, K.M., 1995), frameworks for knowledge creation and dissemination and for its direction and management.

Figure 12 shows a bibliographic analysis using the terms “knowledge management” and “strategy”. A period of latency is visible until about 1996, followed by a rapid growth over two years to a level of about 250 citations per year. The plots show a steady level of industry discourse from about 1998 but continued growth in academic discourse till about 2005. There is some evidence of a change in focus, with some anecdotal evidence suggesting that the CKO role is changing, or in, some cases, disappearing and that many organizations are still not clear what is the most appropriate strategic approach for knowledge management.

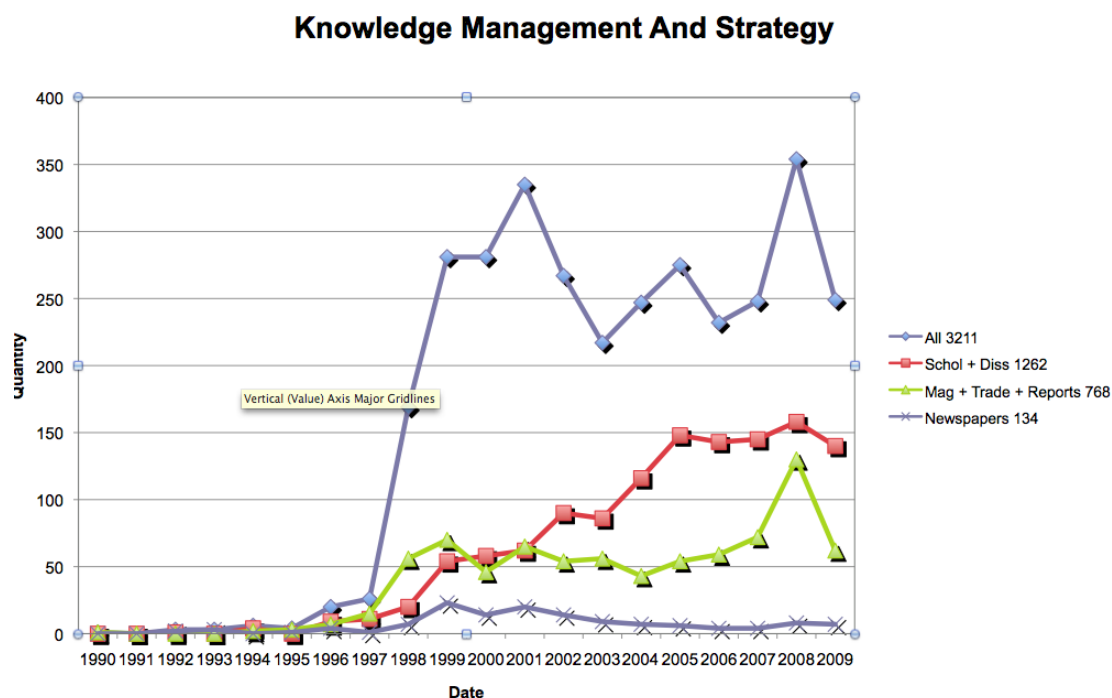


Figure 12: A KM discourse analysis 1990-2009, search terms “Knowledge Management’ and ‘Strategy”

3.8 A “Next Generation” of KM

After the growth phase as the discourse plateaued, several of the original KM fashion-leader authors developed arguments that there were significant inadequacies in KM as proposed and implemented in the first decade and claimed that a reinvention or “Next” Generation might be needed for success. Specifically McElroy calls for Second Generation Knowledge Management (McElroy, M. W. , 2002, 2003). Snowden (2002a) suggests that we are moving towards a Third Generation Knowledge Management and Wiig calls for what described as Next Generation Knowledge Management.

These arguments for the development of a new generation of KM are consistent with the management fashion concept of re-invention, where the original proponents identify failures in the initial evolution of the innovation and propose changes to improve the practice.

3.9 A division in the KM discourse

To further test the discourse on the study themes, a content analysis study was carried out on the abstracts of all papers published in the five most highly rated KM-related journals since the inception of each to mid-2010, a total of some 2176 papers:

- The Learning Organization (established 1994) -- 419 abstracts
- Journal of Knowledge Management (est. 1997) -- 676 abstracts
- Knowledge and Process Management (est. 1997) -- 340 abstracts
- Journal of Intellectual Capital (est. 2000) -- 482 abstracts
- Knowledge Management Research and Practice (est. 2003) -- 259 abstracts

The tool used was *Crawdad Desktop 2.0 Text Analysis Software*, which allows the analysis of large qualitative datasets of textual material using natural language processing techniques to examine word influence and clustering, including developing visual displays to show ontological relationships. It examines measures of influence of words and phrases in texts using Centering Resonance Analysis (CRA), which identifies “discursively important words and represents these as a network” then uses “structural properties of the network to index word importance” (Corman et al., 2002).

However the differences between the journals can best be demonstrated through the examination of the influential words within each text and this is presented in Table 1, which shows the influence ranking of key words. According to the analysis tool, all of these words are considered to be significant, with those in italics being considered very significant. Of the 31 words identified in the cross of general analysis, between 17 and 27 appear in each of the individual journals. The largest difference is that within the *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, where 14 words that ranked within the journal do not appear in the composite analysis. Closer examination shows that the majority of these relate to financial accounting and asset valuation activities (the most significant being intangible, capital, asset, measurement, financial and disclosure). The most notable omission in this journal is the term “knowledge management” which is not recognized as being of statistical influence. *The Learning Organisation* has nine words that do not appear in the composite ranking (the most significant being change, action, action, individual, work, employee and culture).

The *Journal of Knowledge Management* and *Knowledge and Process Management*, in contrast, do not contain significant references to intellectual capital or assets, financial measures in general and terms such as culture, social, individual, work and relationship have a very low or no significance. *Knowledge Management, Research and Practice* has 10 words that do not appear in the composite list. In some cases, these do appear in individual journals’ lists (for example social, work, sharing) and others are related directly to its research focus (such as theory and literature).

As might be expected, the most significant (highest-ranking) words each journal have a close correspondence to the title of that journal. However a more detailed inspection indicates a significantly different level of discourse in each journal with a distinct separation as to whether or not “knowledge management” is seen as the relevant discipline.

Table 1: The most influential words in each of the five journals

Rank	All Journals	Journal of Intellectual Capital	Journal of Knowledge Management	Knowledge and Process Management	Knowledge Management Research and Practice	The Learning Organization
1	knowledge	intellectualcapital	knowledge	knowledge	knowledge	learning
2	knowledgemanagement	knowledge	knowledgemanagement	process	knowledgemanagement	organization
3	organization	value	organization	knowledgemanagement	system	organizational
4	learning	company	management	organization	process	knowledge
5	process	intangible	process	business	organization	management
6	intellectualcapital	management	system	company	new	model
7	management	capital	model	management	management	organisation
8	system	firm	technology	system	development	development
9	model	analysis	development	organizational	social	change
10	organizational	performance	framework	development	practice	process
11	company	asset	information	model	theory	system
12	development	model	organizational	new	community	action
13	business	business	firm	information	organizational	new
14	framework	organization	business	project	model	business
15	firm	information	innovation	community	different	concept
16	analysis	relationship	analysis	firm	information	practice
17	new	innovation	role	technology	intellectualcapital	company
18	information	financial	company	framework	company	knowledgemanagement
19	performance	development	performance	analysis	communication	analysis
20	technology	industry	new	industry	organisation	relationship
21	innovation	process	concept	service	learning	framework
22	value	new	practice	strategy	literature	performance
23	industry	framework	industry	change	work	manager
24	role	human	strategy	activity	perspective	role
25	strategy	measurement	community	innovation	business	individual
26	practice	method	network	role	sharing	work
27	concept	empirical	learning	culture	firm	project
28	relationship	sector	article	context	use	employee
29	community	strategy	perspective	learning	successful	strategy
30	project	different	social	manager	concept	theory
31	perspective	disclosure	peter	practice	role	culture

4. Discussion

In the previous section, a bibliographic discourse analysis of the key concepts within knowledge management was presented in a series of graphs and in Table 1. A summary of the citations analysed by type is shown in Table 2. From inspection of the citations examined, the graphs and the tables, the following conclusions can be drawn in applying management fashion theory to the discipline of knowledge management:

- For each of the themes, there is strong evidence of the influence of management fashion setters, including hero-manager gurus and consultant gurus. The KM field has been strongly influenced by the work of a small number of gurus, initially hero-manager gurus and consultant gurus, with some academic gurus adding their influences in the mid to late 1990s.
- With the possible exception of “organizational learning” every one of the topics analysed demonstrated a latency period followed by a rapid growth in popularity, consistent with the concept of a management fad or fashion.

- None of the topics analysed demonstrates any decline, with most showing consistent interest or increases in the discourse, thus providing no evidence of a fashion decline.
- In each topic, the early growth in discourse took place in industry and the popular press, with academic discourse initially lagging and then increasing to pass the discourse rates of the other communities.
- For the three most frequently occurring topics (Knowledge Management, KM and IT and Intellectual Capital), overall levels of discourse in academe and industry were quite similar. For the other six topics, much more discourse took place within academe than in industry.
- With the single exception of Intellectual Capital, popular press interest in the topics was fleeting, typically lasting no more than two or three years, peaking in 1999/2000 and then declining to very low levels.
- The cross- journal analysis presented in Table 1 raises additional questions regarding the perceptions of KM. The difference in the most important words in each of the three KM-centric journals when compared to the Intellectual Capital and Organisational Learning journals is quite significant and raises questions as to the degree to which they are actually working in the same discipline.
- The results for 2008 and 2009 need to be considered carefully. As has been explained earlier, the significant spike in interest within industry sources visible in 2008 for every topic, except for organisational learning is due to new edition of a specific set of industry journals and it did not indicate any increase in discourse. For 2009, although a slight decline is visible in some plots, bibliographic reviews might be expected to under-report the most recent year since many publications restrict access to the most current volumes.

Table 2: Summary of discourse analysis

	ALL		ACADEMIC		INDUSTRY		NEWSPAPERS		DISCOURSE SUMMARY
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Knowledge Management	25901	30%	7799	28%	7184	28%	1387	5%	Latency period, rapid growth, steady level for last 10 years, similar interest in academic and industry discourse, limited newspaper interest
KM & Information Technology/Systems	10114	31%	3170	28%	2845	28%	441	4%	Latency period till 1996, then rapid growth over 3 years, followed by steady state for academic and industry discourse at quite similar levels
Intellectual Capital/Assets	5593	29%	1596	34%	1886	34%	2072	37%	Latency period, initially rapid then steady growth over 15 years, steady and similar levels of academic, industry and newspaper discourse
Organisational Learning	8653	78%	6755	20%	1742	20%	156	2%	Limited latency period, rapid growth over 10 years, then steady level of growth, dominant discourse is academic, much lower levels of industry and newspaper discourse
KM Processes	6253	45%	2833	21%	1290	21%	157	3%	Latency period till 1996, then rapid growth over 5 years, followed by steady growth of academic and flat industry discourse
KM & Strategy	3211	39%	1262	24%	768	24%	134	4%	Latency period till 1996, then rapid growth over 3 years, followed by fairly steady growth for academic and flatter industry discourse
KM Models	2750	70%	1930	14%	386	14%	45	2%	Latency period till 1997, then steady growth over 11 year period, with almost all discourse in academe
Communities of Practice	1901	75%	1430	18%	338	18%	47	2%	Latency period, steady growth over 10 years, dominant discourse is academic, much lower levels of industry and newspaper discourse
Knowledge Work(ers)	635	52%	328	31%	196	31%	17	3%	Latency period till 1996, then rapid growth over 3 years, followed by steady growth for academic and slightly flatter industry discourse, but at similar levels of interest

This bibliometric discourse analysis demonstrates a significant and consistent shift with increasing levels of interest by academics not being matched by writers in industry sources. In addition, although the field of KM was distinctive for the significant early involvement of practitioners as trendsetters, an extensive recent examination of the discourse life cycle of the body of literature in Knowledge Management/Intellectual Capital from 1994 to 2008 (Serenko et al., 2010) describes a very significant shift in authorship. In the early years of KM, non-academics constituted one-third of all authors. However, “by 2008, practitioners’ contributions dropped to only ten percent of all KM/IC authors. Pragmatic field studies and experiments, which require an active cooperation of businesses and the involvement of practitioners, constitute only 0.33 percent of all inquiry methods. There has also been a decline in case studies.”

In addition, Serenko et al also report that as “the number of research-oriented practitioners has been declining, so has the number of non-academic readers.” The authors suggest that this move away from practice to theory creates a communication gap between researchers and practitioners that

makes it difficult for KM/IC scholarly research to be “transformed into practical managerial approaches and organizational practices”.

This increasing divide between practitioner and researchers reflects the broader debate, often referred to as Mode 1 vs. Mode 2 research (Huff and Huff, 2001, Starkey and Madan, 2001, Gibbons et al., 1994). As Starkey & Madan suggest, "Business is increasingly concerned with relevance, while business and management researchers in universities cling to a different view of knowledge." Traditional Mode 1 research is often within a single discipline (consider the findings presented above for organizational learning and communities of practice) whereas Mode 2 research tends to be more heterogeneous with a more direct interaction between research and practice, thus it might be argued to have a good fit to the multidisciplinary field of KM.

5. Conclusions

This paper has examined the discourse life cycle of knowledge management and its key related concepts, in the context of management fads, enduring fashions and reinvention. This discourse analysis has demonstrated the existence of a latency period followed by a period of rapid growth and continued interest, as suggested by Abramson. As yet, no evidence of a fashion decline is evident, thus it seems to be an enduring fashion.

Also, consistent with Management Fashion Theory, a small number of key fashion setters, individuals who had a significant influence over the initial growth of the KM field have recommending the adoption of a Next Generation of KM -- in management fashion terms, a Re-invention.

One concern that this review has identified is whether the variety of topics often considered to be “Knowledge Management” really form part of the same field. While there can be little argument that there are common themes, there are sufficient differences between what is describe as Knowledge Management and the approaches and language in the fields of Intellectual Capital and Organisational Learning that might suggest that these be considered are fields.

Thus the KM discipline appears to have moved into an “enduring fashion” position and has not followed the “fad” pattern evidenced by most of the other management innovations previously studied. However, perhaps the greatest concerns from this review are the increasing divide between practitioner and researcher in this field and the confusing perceptions of what is or is not Knowledge Management.

6. Limitations and next steps

From a methodological perspective, the discourse analysis carried out is, of course, dependent on the quality of classification systems offered by the online academic publishers.

Despite this continuing and diverse discourse, there has been limited fieldwork looking the diffusion of these concepts. As with most other management fashion studies, this paper looks at the discourse around the proposed innovation of KM and not at the actual diffusion of each of the topics analysed. A useful next stage would be to look at the actual diffusion of the key KM topic both through the examination of secondary data from other studies as well as original fieldwork to look at current adoption of KM.

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