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Management fashion as image-spectacle: The production of best-selling management books

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Abstract

Drawing on the work of Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle and Daniel Boorstin'sThe Image, this article argues that aesthetic and management fashions are not separate forms, as both represent the preeminence of the image spectacle. Central to this is the increasing emergence of pseudoevents and synthetic products. Using empirical findings from a study of the production of six best-selling management books, it shows that they are manufactured coproductions that result from an intricate editorial process in which the original ideas are moulded in order for them to have a positive impact on the intended audience. Central to this is a set of conventions that stress the vivification of ideas. The editorial process thus seeks to enhance the aesthetic attractiveness of the ideas. The implications of the conceptual approach and empirical findings are considered with respect to current understandings of management fashion.

Keywords

management gurus, management fashion, spectacle

> *"Best-selling management books represent a central feature of communication in modern society, the preeminence of the image. They are manufactured contrivances that are designed to have maximum impact on the intended audience and so gain a mass appeal."*

In 1995 Business Week ("Did dirty tricks," 1995) exposed an intricate scheme that manipulated the sales of The Discipline of Market Leaders to ensure that it entered The New York Times best-seller list. Employees of CSC Index, which had been the birthplace for Hammer and Champy's Re-engineering the Corporation (1993) and where the two authors worked, appeared to have spent at least $250, 000 purchasing more than 10,000 copies of the book. In addition, Business Week claimed that CSC Index channelled corporate purchases of an additional 30,000 to 40,000 copies through selected bookstores with the intent of raising the book's profile on the Times list.

Crainer (1998) has argued that several recent best-selling management books have been ghostwritten. He points out that a company run by the 'queen of ghost writers,' Donna Sammons Carpenter, and several other individuals are behind many of the recent management best-sellers including Re-engineering the Corporation and The Discipline of Market Leaders (1995).

In an article in the December 2001 issue of Fast Company, Tom Peters stated in an interview with respect to In Search of Excellence, which he cowrote with Robert Waterman 20 years earlier, 'This is pretty small beer, but for what it's worth. Okay, I confess: We faked the data' ("The real confessions of Tom Peters," 2001).

Previous explanations of the appeal of different management ideas are generally based on the assumption that regardless of the reasons for their popularity, they are founded on an unbreakable link to an authored work and some original analysis of an aspect of organizational life (e.g., Abrahamson, 1996a, 1996b; Furusten, 1999; Jackson, 2001; Kennedy, 2001). Fundamentally, an individual, or group of individuals, has conducted some "observations" that they have subsequently distilled into an essence or "success formula." This is then brought to the attention of the intended audience in an undistorted form and is either accepted or rejected. In this sense they are authentic in that they are not ersatz or contrived.

This article argues that best-selling management books are indicative of broader social developments with respect to communication. Specifically, it draws on the argument that our lives are increasingly filled by pseudoevents and synthetic products. Whether adopting a constructionist or realist stance, a number of commentators point out that there is an increasingly problematic connection between what is presented (i.e., the appearance or image) for consumption and a notion of the "original" (see Baudrillard, 1988, 1994, 1998; Best, 1989; Best & Kellner, 1997, 1999, 2000; Boorstin, 1961/1992; Debord, 1967). Examples include news stories, celebrity magazines, tourist attractions, political pronouncements, popular music, so-called reality television programmes1, and so forth. None of these phenomena are as they seem because they are fabricated somewhere by somebody in order to have a predesigned impact on an intended audience. They are packaged to be concrete, immediately graspable, and most importantly, to have maximum impact and mass appeal. In the process, the distinction between what is real and what is not becomes blurred. As synthetic image builds on synthetic image we can no longer assume the image we consume bears a direct relationship to an original (i.e., that what we consume is truly authentic). In this idealized and hypostasized world in which our view of reality becomes increasingly uncertain, our notion of verisimilitude and what passes for truth is increasingly turned upside down. The notion that reality is grounded in terms of a link to an authentic original does not necessarily hold with the consequence that nothing can be taken as certain because images end up becoming real, and reality ends up transformed into images.

As the three vignettes at the beginning of this article demonstrate, these trends have permeated the production of those books that are frequently acknowledged as the progenitors of fashionable ideas. Their popularity with readers cannot be attributed to "real" sales. The writer of the book and the named author on the cover are not necessarily the same individual. Finally, the data or observations that underpin the ideas being presented cannot be assumed to exist. Thus, the assumption that the books themselves and the ideas they contain are grounded in terms of the authenticity of a referent point does not necessarily hold. They therefore represent a form of pseudoknowledge. In this article, we examine this issue by focusing on the process by which a number of best-selling books have been fabricated and the implications of this for our understanding of management fashion more generally.

In the first of this article's five parts we critically review the literature on management fashion. Building on this critique, the second part draws on the ideas of Boorstin (1961/1992) and Debord (1967) to argue that aesthetic and management fashions cannot be conceived of as separate forms because both represent the preeminence of the image-spectacle. Following a discussion of the research data and methods, the fourth part outlines the empirical findings resulting from a study of the production of six best-selling

management books. The article closes with a discussion of the implications of the conceptual approach and research findings for our understanding of management fashion.

MANAGEMENT FASHION

Three general strands can be discerned in the management fashion literature. The first stream is concerned to identify and explicate patterns in the life cycle of the management fashion discourse. The lineage of this literature can be traced to Abrahamson's (1991, 1996a, 1996b) seminal papers on the management fashion-setting process. Drawing on the innovation-diffusion literature (Rogers, 1983) and neoinstitutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), his theory argued that groups of interrelated knowledge entrepreneurs and industries, identified as management consultants, management gurus, business schools, and mass media organizations, are characterized as being in a race to sense managers' emergent collective preferences for new techniques. Rational and progressive norms are seen as governing the choice of managerial ideas and techniques. Rational normative expectations are that management techniques will be rational (i.e., efficient means to important ends), whereas progressive normative expectations are that management ideas will progress over time (i.e., be repeatedly replaced by new and better techniques). The members of the fashion-setting community develop rhetorics that "convince fashion followers that a management technique is both rational and at the forefront of managerial progress" (Abrahamson, 1996a, p. 267). Their rhetorics must therefore articulate why it is imperative that managers should pursue certain organizational goals and why their particular technique offers the best means to achieve these goals. Thus, within this model the management fashion-setting community is viewed as supplying mass audiences with ideas and techniques that have the potential for developing mass followings. These may or may not become fashions depending on fashion setters' ability to redefine fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques are state of the art and meet their immediate needs.

The plethora of empirical studies emanating from this model have focused primarily on the diffusion pattern of a range of fashionable discourses within the print media. Using citation analysis, the number of references to a particular idea in a sequence of years are counted and plotted to identify the life cycle of a fashionable management idea. The results of these studies demonstrate that the life cycles of a number of fashionable management ideas are characterized by an initial period in which the frequency of citations increases, peaks, and then declines; although the shapes of the curves for different ideas are not necessarily identical nor symmetrical (i.e., they do not necessarily rise and fall at the same rate) and vary between countries (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Benders & van Veen, 2001; Gibson & Tesone, 2001; Spell, 1999, 2001). Furthermore, whilst the life spans of recent management fashions are considerably shorter than those for ideas that came to prominence in earlier periods, their peaks are much higher (Carson, Lanier, Carson, & Guidry, 2000).

The second broad strand of literature has focused on identifying those factors that account for the popularity of particular management books and the ideas they seek to promote. Some commentators have focused on what Grint (1994) has termed the "internalist" approach. That is, the popularity of a book is related to its novel and superior content when compared to previous ideas (see McGovern, 1997; Newstrom & Pierce, 1993). Others have adopted the "externalist" approach by seeking to determine "why the package is effective in its particular envelope of space and time" (Grint, 1994, p. 192). From this perspective the key question is, Why do some ideas take off and engage particular audiences at certain times and not others? In answering it, the popularity and success of a book and its ideas are related to its ability to resonate with and be in harmony with the expectations and understandings of its target audience. If a book fails to convince its target audience of the plausibility and appropriateness of its ideas, then it will probably not be bought in the quantities necessary to become a best-seller2. According to Grint (1994), "for the 'plausibility' to occur the ideas most likely to prevail are those that are apprehended as capturing the Zeitgeist or 'spirit of the times'" (p. 193).

In a related strand of literature, Jackson (1999, 2001, 2002) has examined the rhetorical appeal of three management ideas that were popular in the 1990s: effectiveness, the learning organization, and reengineering. He argued that rhetoric accounts for the "emergence and predominance of just a few particular fashions over many others that are competing for the manager's attention at any given period of time" (Jackson, 2001, p. 39). Drawing on Bormann's (1972) fantasy theme analysis, his research identifies specific rhetorical elements that underpin the popularity of each fashionable idea.

Several writers have combined the two approaches distinguished by Grint (1994). For example, Kieser (1997) and Furusten (1999) have identified a number of common elements in best-selling management books. These include a focus on a single factor, the contrasting of old ideas with the new such that the latter are presented as qualitatively better and superior, the creation of a sense of urgency such that the introduction of the ideas is presented as pressing and unavoidable, the linkage of the ideas to highly treasured management values, case studies of outstanding success, and a stress on an ideas' universal applicability. Even if all these elements are present, Kieser (1997) wrote that they "are useless if the timing is not perfect" (p. 61). Hence, best-selling management books must not only present their ideas in certain ways, they must also appear plausible by speaking to their readers' immediate concerns.

The final strand of literature focuses on the individuals who are identified as the authors of popular management books and the progenitors of many fashionable ideas-the management gurus. It argues that the success and impact of their ideas is due to the form in which they are presented-their powerful public performances. To date, academic studies of the public performances of management gurus have largely consisted of theoretical discussions that, using the work of Lewin (1951) and Sargant (1957/1997), have depicted the gurus as experts in persuasive communication who seek to transform the consciousness of their audiences through powerful oratory (Clark, 1995; Clark & Salaman, 1996; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 1996).

FASHION AS IMAGE-SPECTACLE

Although the literature reviewed above provides important insights into the character of the life cycles of recently fashionable management ideas and the possible reasons for their popularity, several commentators have nevertheless highlighted a number of significant shortcomings (see Clark, 2001, in press; Kieser, 1997). In this article we focus on the notion that the management fashion literature has a tendency to be self-contained in that it is almost completely uninformed by theories of aesthetic fashion or broader discussions about similar social phenomena. Management fashion is regarded as a special case requiring new theory and explanation. For example, in the most cited article on the topic, Abrahamson (1996a, p. 255) has argued that in contrast to the beauty of aesthetic fashion, management techniques must appear rational and progressive and are shaped by technical and economic forces in additional to sociopsychological forces. Consequently, theories of aesthetic fashions are deemed inappropriate. However, Kieser (1997) has argued that similar forces shape demand in both the aesthetic and management forms of fashion. He further argued that rhetoric "which is the essence of management fashion, is an aesthetic form" (p. 54). In his view, therefore, a separate theory of management fashion is not required, because existing conceptual approaches with respect to fashion in its aesthetic form supply a relevant and comprehensive explanatory framework.

We wish to build on this latter point by arguing that management and aesthetic fashions both express and exemplify broader social trends to which they are inextricably linked. In this sense they are not different forms of fashion. Our specific argument is that bestselling management books represent a central feature of communication in modern society, the preeminence of the image. As such, they are manufactured contrivances that are designed to have maximum impact on the intended audience and so gain a mass appeal. In the process of their production their link to a concrete understanding of organisations founded upon either research or direct experience is loosened as the form of their presentation takes precedence. In some cases, this link never existed from the outset because the book is completely fabricated. Whichever

is the case, these books are designed to have mass appeal with the consequence that the contents are vivified so that they are presented as a "spectacular and glittering universe of image and signs" (Best & Kellner, 1999, p. 143). Thus, they are fundamentally an aesthetic form.

This argument builds on some of the central postulates of Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle (1967), which in turn draws heavily on Daniel Boorstin's 1961 book The Image. Because many of the passages of Debord's book are unreferenced paraphrases or detournements of statements by other authors, this intellectual debt is unacknowledged. Adopting a realist perspective, Boorstin is concerned to understand the implications that attach to a social transformation that he terms the "Graphic Revolution." This he defines as the "ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images" (Boorstin, 1992, p. 13). Central to this is the creation of a "thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life" (p. 3) as we increasingly manufacture "illusions with which to deceive ourselves" (p. 5). Boorstin's purpose is to examine an element of this "synthetic reality" that is created to meet our need for interesting and spectacular diversions which he terms "pseudo-events" (p. 9). These pseudoevents are not spontaneous but are "planned, planted or incited . . . for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced" (p. 11). They are "arranged for the convenience of the reporting or reproducing media" and are deemed successful based on a measurement of how widely they are reported (p. 11). They spawn other pseudoevents in "geometric progression . . . because every kind of pseudo-event (being planned) tends to become ritualised, with a protocol and a rigidity all its own" (p. 33).

Boorstin's (1992) argument serves as a foundation for Debord's theory in that both are concerned with the ascendancy of image and concomitant loss of direct experience and a sense of a connection to reality due to the simulacrum effects of the media. As Boorstin (p. 19) noted, the increasing reporting of pseudoevents in the media makes the tracing of the "original" difficult. Pseudoevents are reported in the same way as actual events, with the consequence that authenticity cannot be easily ascertained.3 As they are reproduced they become the referents by which we understand key aspects of our lives, with the consequence that they produce "new categories of experience" that "are no longer classifiable by the old common sense tests of true or false" (p. 211). Thus, the media have erased distinctions between true and false, real and unreal. Treating facsimiles as real creates a "new world of blurs" in which the "new images have blurred traditional distinctions" (p. 213). As Boorstin wrote, "In this new world, where almost everything can be true, the socially rewarded art is that of making things seem true" (p. 212). By being "more vivid, more attractive, more impressive, and more persuasive than reality itself" (p. 36), pseudoevents will eclipse ordinary, spontaneous events, with the consequence that people will live in a world "where fantasy is more real than reality, where the image has more dignity than its original" (p. 37).

Building on this argument and perspective, Debord (1967) began by paraphrasing Marx's opening sentence in Capital Volume 1-"In societies where the modern conditions of production prevail, all life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (#1)4. At the heart of Debord's thinking is the notion that direct experience and the determination of events by individuals are replaced by a passive contemplation of images. Whereas Marx spoke of the degradation of being into having, Debord talked of a further transformation from having into appearing. In this situation the material object draws "its immediate prestige and its ultimate function" (#17) as an image that dominates people's understandings of their everyday life. "Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle" (#25). Atomized individuals are at once united in these hypostacized abstractions that form the spectacle. But at the same time these images interpose between concrete reality and individuals such that there is a split between real social activity and its representation. Thus, although the notion of the spectacle is a complex term that "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (#10), it is nevertheless centrally concerned with highlighting the social consequences of a society in which there is a "growing multitude of image-objects" (#15) that filter and portray social reality as image. As Best and Kellner (1997) wrote, "Within this abstract system, it is the appearance of the commodity that is more decisive than its actual use value, and the symbolic packaging of commodities-be they cars or presidents-generates an image industry and

new commodity aesthetics" (p. 85). Thus, Debord's theory is concerned with the changing nature of the commodity form in which its value shifts from the concrete to the image.

Debord is referring to a process, previously identified by Boorstin, in which images come to dominate and replace our concrete understanding and experience of social reality5. We no longer live life directly but experience the world at one remove because "In the spectacle, one part of the world represents itself to the world and is superior to it" (Debord, 1967, #29). As Best (1989) wrote, "The spectacle escalates abstraction to the point where we no longer live life in the world per se-'inhaling and exhaling all the powers of nature' (Marx)-but in an abstract image of the world" (pp. 30-31). The spectacularization of society is therefore a process of separation in which idealized intangible images come to dominate tangible lived experience such that "the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which impose themselves as the tangible par excellence" (Debord, 1967, #36). The spectacular society is therefore fundamentally concerned with the production of compelling illusions, pseudoforms, and counterfeit commodities. We consume a world that is fabricated for us rather than actively produce our own. Our experience of life is infected by the spectacle because it is located in and determined by a spectacular universe of shimmering images, glossy surfaces, and dissembling masks. As Debord wrote, "The concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a speculative universe" (#19). It is this ensemble of independent representations that comes to control our thoughts and actions. As we become mesmerized by the spectacle, our attitudes about the world and events within it, our gestures and the phrases we use in everyday speech, even the topics of conversation are not of our own making but determined by the envoys of the spectacle-the image producers and disseminators. In what follows, we examine the activities one group of image creators.

DATA AND METHOD

As mentioned above, previous research into the management fashion phenomenon has adopted a relatively static approach using either citation analysis or a variety of techniques to analyse texts. In contrast, this study focuses on the process by which six best-selling management books were produced. These books were published between 1976 and 1995. They focus on organization and management issues rather than personal development and success. They were selected on the basis of their popularity over the last 27 years as indicated in numerous studies of fashionable ideas (for example, Abrahamson, 1996a, 1996b, Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999, Carson et al., 2000; Kieser, 1997; Spell, 1999, 2001). In addition, the authors and these books each feature in the upper reaches of rankings of (a) influential management thinkers (Crainer & Dearlove, 2002) and (b) books on management (Bedeian & Wren, 2001).

In each case we conducted semistructured interviews with a range of individuals concerned with their production. We began by contacting the authors and editors of each book. Where these individuals mentioned that other personnel had been involved with the production of a book, these individuals in turn were contacted and interviews conducted. It became apparent that a number of editors and ghostwriters who work freelance had been involved in more than one of the books that are the focus of this study. Overall, we interviewed six authors, five book editors (two in the United States and three in the United Kingdom/Europe), three editors and publishers (two in the United States and one in the United Kingdom/ Europe) and four ghostwriters (three in the United States and one in the United Kingdom). The interviewees' average period of experience as a guru was a little greater than 12 years with a range from 6 to 40 years. With respect to those in publishing it was around 9 years with a range from 7 to 23 years. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit the respondents' views concerning the processes surrounding the commissioning of the books, their writing, editing, and marketing. In particular, we were concerned to identify their views as to what distinguished a successful from an unsuccessful book, the role of different personnel at the various points in the production process, the process by which the ideas were created and developed, and the different methods used to disseminate ideas to the target audience. Attention was

therefore given to previously published books in addition to those recently published and in the process of being produced. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Although it was not possible to completely eradicate attribution error, we nevertheless adopted a number of measures to reduce its impact. In conducting the interviews we were not seeking to privilege the views of any one group and so elevate their role and status in the process. Rather, the intention was to obtain multiple understandings that could then be used as the basis for further discussions with the individuals. The process was therefore also iterative in that a number of the respondents were interviewed more than once in order to deepen our knowledge about the production of these books and check information provided by other interviewees. After each interview a copy of the notes or transcript was sent to each interviewee. A number of interviewees reflected on these and via correspondence provided additional information on their role and that of others. It should be noted that to protect the identity of interviewees, names are not used, and book titles, where they are referred to, are pseudonyms.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then subject to a form of grounded theory analysis using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to identify similarities and differences in the ways the gurus, book editors, and ghostwriters described the processes through which best-selling management books are produced and marketed. In analyzing the data we sought to avoid imposing theoretical and conceptual frameworks that had been developed a priori. Instead, in an inductive and interactive process we developed, invoked, and refined our theory, concepts, and analytic categories on the basis of careful, detailed, and repeated analysis of the interview transcripts. This process, described by Mason (2002, p. 180) as "moving between everyday concepts and meanings, lay accounts and social explanations," enabled us to "identify salient, grounded categories of meaning held by participants in the setting" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 114). Our inductive, polyphonic, and reflexive approach sought to surface the meanings given by the social actors to their actions and social situation and in the process ascertain a consistent pattern of understanding within and between the different categories of respondent (Blaikie, 2000). Although they highlighted their own roles in the book production process, they nonetheless also indicated that the process not only involved extensive collaboration between authors and editors and ghostwriters but also was informed by a set of conventions that the latter associate with best-selling books.

THE CREATION OF THE BEST-SELLING MANAGEMENT BOOK AS IMAGE-SPECTACLE

Our analysis of the interviews reveals the extent to which best-selling management books are manufactured contrivances that emerge from a creative process in which the form of the presentation of management ideas takes precedence over their actual use value. This is reflected in the fact that the editors and ghostwriters distinguished between these books and other texts aimed at a managerial audience in two ways. First, the ideas and manuscripts that were deemed to have blockbuster potential were regarded as starbased products, that is, as vehicles for promoting authors and their brand. As one editor stated, "The author is all-important. What we want is to build a brand so that the author has instant recognition. This will help when we come to publish their future books and develop synergistic lines. Another editor explained that these books were star vehicles in the following terms:

> When you publish these books you have to work on the assumption that most people who buy it won't read it. It needs to be seductive for reasons other than content. The package is the total package, the book and the person. . . . Packaging the author is as important as packaging the book. We promote the person as much as the book. . . . What you are selling is an attachment to a particular person and their brand or ideas. Our job is either to create this or to develop it further.

The key point here is that the book is as much a vehicle for promoting an individual as the ideas it contains. From the outset it is designed as part of a broader package of related products that will all feature the author. As Crainer (1998) has similarly noted with respect to Stephen Covey's book The

Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, it was preceded by commercially successful audiotape programmes, video-based training packages, and presentations on the corporate lecture circuit.

Second, given the previous point, they were not viewed as immutable objects in which the sanctity of the authors' original ideas was sacrosanct. Rather, they were books that required shaping prior to publication. The initial idea was generally viewed as no more than raw material that had to be further developed and moulded before it could be published as a book. Editors, therefore, were not seeking fully formed books that could be published with minimal copyediting but rather the glimmer of an idea that they believed could be shaped and packaged to appeal to a management audience, and to promote the author and their brand. As one editor noted:

There is no general requirement in terms of the amount of detail we expect from the outset. We take on some books with detailed synopses of each chapter and the first chapter written. Other books start off as a one-page summary of a series of ideas. What I am looking for is something that will appeal to an audience no matter how detailed.

Making a similar point when referring to a particularly successful book, another editor stated, "I liked the concept. We didn't have much to go on initially, just some loose descriptions of the chapters. I knew if we pitched the content in the right way it would do well."

Having established that the editors and ghostwriters are primarily concerned not with the utility of management books but rather with their potential as star vehicles that can be used to build and promote an author's brand, we now turn to discuss how this shapes the writing and editing process prior to publication.

THE WRITING PROCESS

COLLABORATION

Management best-selling books, like many cultural and consumer products, "do not spring forth full blown but are made somewhere by somebody" (Peterson, 1979, p. 152). The displayed character of a potentially best-selling management book at the point of publication is the result of active collaboration at earlier stages between the originator or originators and a range of support personnel rather than being the work of a single person (i.e., the author). In this sense, these management books are collective social products that depend for their character on reciprocal collaboration between a network of support personnel (Clark, 2003). Thus, the milieu within which they are produced shapes the form and content of the ideas prior to their presentation to the target audience.

Given that these books are collaborative productions, a key role of the editor is to carefully combine and manage the talents of authors and other support personnel in such a way that a book has the best chance of success when released into the marketplace. On some occasions the team may be limited to the author and editor. At other times it may include additional support personnel such as ghostwriters. The decision with respect to the composition of a team relates to their evaluation of a range of information. They may, for example, respond to some particular circumstances with respect to the production of a particular book (e.g., a coauthor withdraws from the project). Other factors include their evaluation of the success or failure of books on which they have worked, competing books in the marketplace, their understanding of the public mood, and so forth. But of primary importance is their evaluation of the author's competence as a writer. One editor/ghostwriter justified both ghostwriting and extensive editorial input during the writing process in the following terms.

Many "authors" can't or won't write. But they may be gifted as thinkers, presenters, synthesizers, commentators, speakers, or entertainers . . . We often assume that if a person is a talented speaker, presenter, motivator, mentor, professor, consultant, trainer, or professional that he or she must also be capable of writing a wonderful book. Wrong. I often use a track and field metaphor. If a person is world

class at the 400 meter hurdles, does that mean the same person should also be world class at the 100 meter sprint, the mile, the high jump, or the marathon?

This comment relates to the earlier point that editors seek to build brands that can then be leveraged into a number of media. In pursuing this strategy an author does not necessarily have to be judged by editors or ghostwriters to be a competent or potential writer of a best-selling management book. If they are seen to be an excellent live presenter but a poor writer, the insinuation is that this can be overcome with the aid of strong editorial input or the employment of a ghostwriter. In view of this, we now turn to examine the role of editors and ghostwriters in more detail.

CONVENTIONS

Central to editors' and ghostwriters' conceptions of popular management writing is a set of textual conventions that pervade best-selling management books. It is these conventions that are at the heart of the spectacularization of these books, because they package the ideas in such a way that the published book is likely to appeal to the intended audience and to promote the author's brand. The conventions derive from, and are justified by reference to, a shared conception of those who purchase best-selling management books. Based on the information sources referred to above, editors and ghostwriters view managers as being extremely busy with a focus on the tangible and immediate and a tendency toward superficiality and short attention spans. An editor reminded one of the gurus in our study he was

writing for managers who are relatively intelligent and can take ideas to work with them, and who are very busy. And a key market for my books was people who take four or five hour flights. When I think of my readers now, I think that on the whole managers read on aeroplanes, or they take my books on holiday, which I find a compliment.

Another of the gurus was advised by his editor to "write clearly and have your readers in mind. It's got to be easily digestible and memorable. Managers are busy people and do not want to wade through lots of waffle." Making a similar point, an editor described their approach to these books as "stripping the ideas to their essence and making sure that the reader is not diverted into irrelevant material. These books need to communicate directly or they will bore the reader."

In the light of this conception of the intended audience for these management books, editors and ghostwriters aim to present the ideas in accessible forms that have two characteristics. The first is that they are easy to read and remember. This requires that the main elements of the ideas be reduced and simplified into pithy lists, acronyms, concepts, mnemonics, metaphors, and stories that are immediately graspable, understood, and assimilated. One editor described their approach to conveying ideas in these books as

> making the core proposition crystal clear. There is no room for ambiguity. From the outset the central themes have to be grouped into a model, framework or list of principles. You want the readers to know what an idea stands for.

In a similar vein, a guru reflecting on the process by which their first best-selling book was written stated,

Writing the book in this way [with the editor] was a wonderfully reflective process and it led to a way of organizing the ideas that I had not planned at the outset. The grouping of the ideas into a number of general principles came with the book writing. So the book writing tied together a number of loose-ends in my thinking and in the process made them more accessible.

Second, the editors and ghostwriters use forms that emphasize and demonstrate the practical relevance of the gurus' ideas. They need to be made vivid and concrete for the audience. Often this involves relating stories of how the gurus' ideas have been successfully implemented in many organizations. Thus, the gurus were exhorted to include examples of their principles being put into practice in order to persuade readers that their analysis and solutions were not only relevant but also the most appropriate. As one guru

was told, “You gotta show them that it really works. Who’s going to buy into something that’s never been tried?”

Another was given the advice that

> in telling stories you have to show that the idea behind the story is backed up by rigorous research but also company practice. So, you have to tell stories about real managers facing real problems in real organizations. Doing this makes the idea more real to the reader.

This last quotation indicates that for some editors the examples are there to show the readers that the guru’s ideas work in practice. The assumption is that if readers can see that organizations have implemented the changes advocated by the guru, then it is also possible for the reader’s organization to achieve the same benefits by adopting the guru’s ideas. However, comments from another guru indicate that these examples can also serve another function in that they may help to legitimize their vision. This is achieved, in part, by carefully selecting organizations that are household names and so, well known to the readers of these books, possibly even admired by them. As this guru stated, “The companies chosen had to be recognizable to large numbers of people, otherwise they will think, “So what?” But if X, Y, or Z did this, then it must really be important.” As another guru said:

I had been working with a number of well-known organizations for many years. I knew the ideas worked. The point of the book was to share their experiences and success with a wider audience so that we could form a critical mass as more organizations became aware of and sought to implement the ideas. One area where [the editor] was really helpful was in getting me to illustrate the ideas with some well-chosen examples.

Again, what was important was to present the ideas in such a way that the readers felt that they, too, could implement what the guru was advocating.

In sum, editors and ghostwriters have a significant, if largely unseen, impact on the fashioning of management ideas in book form. They shape and package ideas in line with conventions that are associated with management best-selling books. Our interviews with editors, ghostwriters, and gurus revealed the extent to which management ideas are mediated through these conventions. This raises important questions concerning the extent to which the gurus’ original or existing ideas are reconfigured and changed as editors and ghostwriters render them accessible to the intended managerial audience. It is clear that these conventions are not neutral conduits that amplify and enhance the authors’ original ideas. As the following quotations indicate, several of the gurus remarked that the form of their ideas changed substantially during the writing or editing process:

I think my first draft was all over the place. It was probably double the length of the final manuscript. I probably produced about five or six complete drafts. Each one would go to [the editor] and they would write back with loads of comments and suggestions. I tell you, if you saw that first draft you wouldn’t recognize the published book.

The hardest thing when writing the book was that I had written all these darn academic papers all my life. I had never written a book. I was very fortunate in that I had a wonderful editor who was a great consultant. He really helped to deconstruct my writing style. He would write samples of what he thought would work for the audience, which I never liked and so re-wrote them. He also told me to bring my personal speaking voice into my writing, which was hard. It was a real learning process which did produce a different kind of book. But I was pleased with that.

I had written other things before but not a book, so as I wrote a draft I would send it to [the editor]. They would send me pages of comments and we would talk on the telephone. This happened many times and through this process the ideas became clearer and the key concepts emerged.

It is clear from the comments that the editing process for a number of the gurus actively shaped and modified their initial ideas so that what was presented to the target audience was qualitatively different

from the draft manuscript or book outline that entered the publishing system. Although in the first two cases they felt that the finished book was better for this intervention, it was nevertheless changed from what they had originally envisaged. None of the gurus whose books had been subject to extensive editorial input viewed this in negative terms. Rather, they portrayed themselves as naive, first-time authors who did not have the necessary skills to write a book (see Clark, 2003). In this respect, they concur with the views of the ghostwriter who earlier argued that many authors are skilled public orators but poor writers.

Although the character of these books often changed during the editorial process, in a number of cases they were complete inventions from the outset in that the editors admitted to first coming up with an idea and then pitching it to an established guru. They then employed someone to write the book whilst the guru lent their name to it. This phenomenon related to a guru's second, third, fourth book, and so on. These manufactured books, which usually involve the refashioning and development of a guru's existing ideas, are important to both gurus and editors. Every 2 or 3 years gurus need a new book to fuel the demand for their services on the corporate lecture circuit. Similarly, the editors are under pressure to extend the life of the gurus' brand in order to maximise the publishers' revenues from their established authors. One U.K. publisher gave the following example of a manufactured book:

[Guru's name] had written Heart7 and we thought of the idea of More Heart. We proposed this to him. He does not receive any money. We pay the ghostwriter. But it extends [guru's name] mini-brand and is something else he can promote on the conference circuit. Manufacturing books is very, very easy for authors to be involved in. . . . We get a big name, they get a new book for little effort. We all benefit. These people don't want to publish for money. What they want is the prestige of having a book in print.

Although by no means all gurus are involved in the manufacture of books, this phenomenon reflects the relative status of books and other media used to disseminate management ideas. As we have indicated, the management gurus included in this study do not restrict their communication activities to books alone but also speak on the international lecture circuit, make video and audio programmes, and produce CD-ROMS and establish Internet sites. It could be argued that these other media are just as able, if not better in certain circumstances, at conveying their ideas in an easily apprehendable and succinct manner. However, they would appear not to have displaced the premier status of the book. The book was generally viewed as a necessary prerequisite for access to the other media. In this sense a best-selling book represents an entry ticket into the broad range of media through which popular management ideas can be communicated. Thus, although some of the gurus included in this study have reduced the number of live presentations they give a year and have withdrawn from making audio and video programmes, not one has stopped writing books. They all see it as a fundamental way of communicating their ideas. Indeed, several gurus consider their long-term popularity to be linked to their ability to continue to publish books. For example, one guru stated, "My books are part of my public identity. When people introduce you you come over as having something to say if they can say 'and here is so and so author of such and such a book.'" However, they may not have either the time to write a book or develop a novel set of ideas. This is where the manufacturing of books plays a crucial role in their continuing status as management gurus.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has argued that ideas presented in popular management books are indicative of a broader social trend in communication-the rise of the image and pseudoform. Drawing on the ideas of both Boorstin and Debord, we have noted a shift to a society where images and representations of reality dominate. Image is ubiquitous. Perceptions of objects, whether they are products, politicians, or management prescriptions, are more important than their actual substance. The "real" is increasingly replaced by pseudoforms, which are presented as authentic. According to Best and Kellner (1999, p. 133) contemporary life is "saturated with spectacles, ranging from daily 'photo opportunities' to highly orchestrated special events that dramatize state power, to TV ads and image management for competing

candidates." The media coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial, the Clinton sex scandals, the death of Princess Diana, and more recently the Washington sniper or the Paul Burrell trial8 are all examples of what Kellner (2003) terms "megaspectacles." These are worldwide, media-driven events that capture the attention of the media public. Although popular management books are not spectacles on this scale, in that they do not permeate the worldwide media to the same degree, they nevertheless share many of their core features in that the displayed character of a potentially fashionable management idea at the point of dissemination is shaped by a process of fabrication. As we have shown, the intricate editing process involves a team of individuals who, by seeking to make the content more vivid and attractive for the intended audience, can alter the original nature of the ideas, sometimes substantially. Indeed, in some cases these books are completely manufactured in that they are written by ghostwriters with little or no participation from the so-called author.

The article has also argued that cooperation within the production system is based upon generalized beliefs, or conventions, of what makes a legitimate and successful management book. As we have indicated, one of the main functions of the system is to impart these conventions to nascent gurus in order to increase the likelihood of their book's becoming a best-seller. This is not to suggest that these conventions are immutable. They evolve and transform in response to shifts in the broader business environment and consumer preferences with the consequence that what is deemed an appropriate management book also changes. For example, the string of corporate scandals in America that followed the collapse of Enron and the fall of countless celebrity bosses has challenged not simply the genre's celebratory tone but its legitimacy. This arises from the key position of popular management books within the institutional fabric that supported the rise of the celebrity CEO. As Khurana (2002) has argued, the media, broadly defined,

> focus not on the complexities of organizations or on rapid changes in the business environment, but rather on the actors involved. This approach personifies the corporation, making much of winners and losers, of who is up and who is down, of who is a good CEO and who is not. The press has thereby turned CEO's . . . into a new category of American celebrity. (p. 74)

This resonates with Clark and Salaman's (1998) argument that popular management theory is successful not because it solves managers problems but because it constitutes the role itself. These books define the management role by offering "a conception of management itself in virtuous, heroic, high status terms" (p. 157). From this point of view, they generate their appeal by articulating the qualities necessary for successful implementation of the management role. As we show in this article, those involved in the production of these books mould the nature and presentation of the ideas for a specific audience-managers. In doing so, these books are presented in such a way that they reinforce why managers are important, why they matter, and why their skills are critical. However, the wave of corporate scandals in the past few years has led to the questioning of the very spectacle that these books seek to project. Continuing to laud the exploits of hero managers is no longer deemed appropriate. Indeed, although these books continue to sell, it is clear that the gleam from the spectacle surface has begun to fade. Consequently, more cynical books, such as Scott Adams's subversive Dilbert cartoons, have recently topped the management best-seller lists ("Business books," 2002; London, 2003). In this respect, in a world of blurs purchasers have switched to more authentic fantasy.

In addition, the article makes several contributions to our understanding of management fashion. First, although a number of authors have sought to differentiate aesthetic and management fashion, this article suggests that one factor accounting for their success is their vivification during the writing process. Although the practical benefits of the ideas are extolled, and this is reinforced with references to well-known successful organizations, their accessibility, immediacy, and simplicity are also considered vital. Thus, the form in which ideas are presented is considered as important as their content. Indeed, some of the individuals who participated in the study would argue that the former is more important. The editorial process seeks to enhance the aesthetic attractiveness of the ideas. In this sense it is a process of beautification. Consequently, our study suggests that distinguishing between "aesthetic" and "technical"

fashions may result in a narrow understanding of the reasons for the popularity of particular ideas. Ignoring aesthetic elements excludes, or downplays, a range of factors that those concerned with the production of best-selling books consider critical to their success.

The study also suggests that the management fashion phenomenon shares a number of features with a range of other social phenomena. Again this indicates that it is not unique, requiring new explanatory frameworks. As we have argued, the image is a dominant form in current society. This article has focused on one group of individuals who are concerned with moulding ideas so that they have a positive impact on the intended audience. The books are designed so that the ideas are presented in such a way that the readers will believe that they will have a positive impact on their organization or working life in some way. Thus, what is critical is not that the ideas actually work but that they are perceived to be of practical benefit and relevance. A key implication of this article is, therefore, that the writing and editing process is a system of persuasion par excellence. Impression management is central to the collective activities of the support personnel that compose the system. In essence, they are seeking to create perceptions with respect to the legitimacy and value of certain works. They have to convince potential buyers and readers that a particular book best meets their immediate and pressing needs. The readers and potential readers are the audience for whom the book is fabricated. The authors, editors, and ghostwriters work as a team trying to generate maximum buying response and interest from the audience. This article indicates that management gurus and their team of support personnel achieve this by producing a product in accordance with a set of general conventions so that it is what it is claimed to be. Thus, regardless of the level of author input in the writing process, a book is presented with an identifiable author on the cover. In this way they seek to assure buyers that their product is worthy of attention and of being purchased. This creates difficulties for purchasers seeking to identify authentic knowledge because the distinction between the real and the unreal is blurred.

Building on the previous point, the final implication of the article relates to the argument that some of the books upon which a number of recent management fashions are founded are pseudoforms in that they are manufactured coproductions9. Given that these books are modified, often substantially, through the editorial process, and occasionally entirely manufactured, they cannot be considered completely authentic in the sense of being primarily the output of an author. But although on occasion they may be ersatz and contrived, their outward appearance is that of an authentic book in that they meet the requirements for this form. Consequently, the audiences of these books are unable to judge which books, or their constituent elements, are the work of an author and which involve the input of an editor or ghostwriter. They all look identical. The fact that they may not be equally authentic has several potentially important implications.

First, the fashions that these books promote lead to real consequences for organizations and the people who work in them (Cane, 1994; “Re-engineering with love,” 1995; Grint & Willcocks, 1995). Furthermore, as we have indicated earlier, the life span of these ideas in recent years has become shorter, which suggests that audience disenchantment sets in more quickly. Thus, the managerial audience needs to engage in much deeper critical questioning of the theoretical and empirical foundations of these books before they become mesmerized by the glittering surface. One approach would be to treat the ideas that these books seek to promote with considerable caution and wait for some form of external validation (e.g., empirical testing and refinement) before rushing to implementation. In this way the onset of a fashion may be delayed, but if its robustness is confirmed, its longevity may be increased. Furthermore, academics can then actively intervene in the fashion-setting process by providing a quality-control function for managerial knowledge that is circulating at any time. Presently, it is recognized that academics have had limited success at intervening in the management-fashion-setting process (Abrahamson 1996a; Spell, 2001; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). It would also encourage greater engagement between academia and business.

Second, those academics conducting research into management fashion and related phenomenon need to attach greater significance to the aesthetic aspects of the popular management ideas. This will give greater recognition to those factors that producers of popular ideas themselves believe are important to their

success. The popularity curves of these ideas may therefore attest to the fabrication skills of backstage personnel rather than fortuitously resonating with the Zeitgeist or mirroring of fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques are state of the art and meet their immediate needs.

NOTES

1. On British television this has been turned upside down by the Channel 4 television series Faking It. In this, individuals with no previous experience in an activity are trained to convince a panel of experts that they really are a chef, conductor, surfer, and so forth.

2. The processes that underpin people's decisions to purchase management books are complex. Gladwell (2000) has highlighted the importance of "connectors," people who bring new products to the attention of large groups of people and persuade them of their importance. It is the actions of these individuals, he argued, that tip a product from being a minority taste to a mass fashion.

3. The media's obsession with government spin indicates that they are very aware of this issue.

4. It is convention to quote the number of each thesis rather the page numbers in Society of the Spectacle (Debord, 1967).

5. Although there is considerable correspondence between Debord's ideas and Baudrillard's notion of "hyperreality," Debord does not abandon the principle that below the image is an objective reality.

6. This is a pseudonym.

7. Paul Burrell was Princess Diana's butler. He was charged with stealing in the region of 200 items from her estate, but his trial collapsed in November 2002 when the queen informed the court that he had notified her, shortly after the princess died, that he had taken many of her papers for safekeeping.

8. We recognize that this article is also a form of coproduction in that prior to its publication we received and responded to the constructive feedback from three referees. These comments have affected the development of the article. However, where this process differs is that we were responsible for the subsequent amendments and the overall authorship of the article.

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