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POPULAR BUSINESS MEDIA: THE MISSING
LINK IN BUSINESS KNOWLEDGE DIFFUSION.
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

The diffusion of business knowledge has been a widely debated topic for the last twenty years. The contributions to this debate have built on disciplines such as Epistemology, Social Psychology, and the Philosophy of Science. In these studies, the analysis of the vehicles of diffusion has emerged as an important issue characterizing business knowledge, as the huge number of publications on management has shown.

This paper aims to outline the role of popular media in the diffusion of business knowledge. Previous studies have neglected these media, focusing only on academic and institutional channels (business schools and consulting firms). With reference mainly to the contributions of the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sociology of Culture, it is argued that popular media have been the major factor in the diffusion of business knowledge during the last ten years.

In particular, popular media have increased the speed at which business practices have been institutionalized by making them known to a wider audience. Moreover, by diffusing business knowledge to laymen, popular media have given economic reasoning a broad-based social legitimacy. The overall outcome of this process has been the popularization of business ideas and business thinkers; the most influential among them have become genuine “maitres a penser”.

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Introduction

How is management and organizational knowledge produced and channeled? How heterogeneous is business knowledge? Do its processes of production, transmission and consumption reflect its epistemological plurality? These important questions were for many years explored only occasionally. Today, some of them are at last the subject of abundant research, as the number of scholarly meetings, publications and so on demonstrates.

The relevance of these issues has been highlighted by the current debate about the usefulness of a dominant paradigm and scientific consensus for the progress of organizational knowledge and the reputation of the field of management studies (Pfeffer, 1993). Since no discussion of paradigms can be carried out without reference to the social institutions which produce and institutionalize that knowledge, attention to these institutions has increased in recent years.

The analysis of the production and diffusion of management knowledge has benefited from theoretical contributions from many disciplines, including anthropology (Geertz), philosophy (Ricoeur), the sociology of culture (Schudson), social history (Chartier), economics (McCloskey), and others. Available studies on administrative knowledge are in many ways based on these approaches, and above all on the sociology of knowledge (Polanyi, Berger and Luckmann). The Neo-Institutional School of Organizational Theory has in recent years provided a basic framework through which the field of organizations has been brought closer to some of the insights provided by the sociology of knowledge.

Although the richness of most works on business and organizational knowledge and its process of diffusion and institutionalization is deservedly well recognized, some issues have been surprisingly overlooked. The basic duality of business knowledge –to put it briefly, both a science and an art in action– has not been fully reflected in the number and breadth of studies so far made on its production and transmission.

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For instance, by far the most analyzed channel of transmission of management knowledge is management education and, above all, business schools. Many studies, from those of pioneers in this field (Whitley and Marceau, 1981) to the most influential recent contributions (Engwall, 1992), have underlined the features of business schools, their curricula, their role as elite screening devices, their integration with the more traditional domains of academia, etc. Sometimes, in connection with the topic of business schools and the more scientific ingredient of business knowledge, research has been conducted into the social institution of management academia: gatekeepers, specialized journals, etc. (Sharplin and Mabry, 1985). Even more recently, research is emerging on the business school sector considered from the competitive strategy viewpoint (Enrione *et al.*, 1994). The reasons for this special interest in business schools are obvious: most researchers work in them and –a methodological reason, this one– data are easier to collect than for other carriers of business knowledge.

Much less attention has been paid to consulting companies, which are an important carrier and legitimizer of business ideas (and also, increasingly, a producer and “formal” educator). This has, in part, been due to the opacity of the industry and the very “ad hoc” nature of the practices of consulting firms.

Other business knowledge transmission media have been almost completely neglected so far, although some scholars (see, for instance, Curran and Stanworth, 1988) have recognized their impact on the diffusion of knowledge. In particular, popular business media –such as popular management books, newspapers, and magazines– have received only scant attention from researchers. Some of the few analyses of this issue have focused on the role of best-selling business books in legitimating managerial practices (Furusten, 1992); others, on the institutionalization and popularization of new management ideas (Alvesson, 1990; Alvarez, 1991).

Our aim in this paper is to assess the role of popular business media in the production, diffusion and legitimation of management and organizational knowledge, and to propose an agenda for research on these topics.

The nature of business knowledge

Although management has been the subject of systematic study for almost a century –Fayol’s “General and Industrial Management” was first published in 1919– the social sources of business knowledge are still very plural, and by no means confined to the channels specialized in formal knowledge. As Nohria and Eccles (1992) remarked in relation to organizational knowledge:

(It) comes from everywhere: it comes from a manager’s own experience, from the experiences of others, from books and articles on a variety of topics, from videotapes and live speeches by managers and management scholars, from formal education in business school MBA and executive programs, and, increasingly, from consulting firms.

Such a complex set of diffusion mechanisms cannot carry a uniform body of meanings. Therefore, some epistemological differences should emerge from a more careful analysis of the knowledge used in the practice of business activities. A first step in this direction could be Polanyi’s (1962) two basic categories of articulated and tacit knowledge.

There is a part of knowledge that we are able to articulate and reproduce by formal and detailed description. And there is another part that cannot be formally reproduced, because it has inferred, unconscious, “tacit” features. The role played by this second part of knowledge gives sense to Polanyi’s statement, “We know more than we say”.

The presence of these two components is easy to see in administrative knowledge and practices. They essentially reproduce the distinction between a more “structured” notion of business activities –management as “science”– and the view of business activities as craft –management as “art”, “politics”, or even “magic”. Departing from the traditional functional view propounded by Fayol and Drucker and others, even academic literature on managerial tasks has recently developed a more “skeptical” view, focusing on the effects of uncertainty and ambiguity (Cohen and March, 1976), and even on the cultural aspects of management (Peters & Waterman, 1982). These features are even more patent in processes of organizational change, so frequent these days. As Whitley (1989) has argued, managerial tasks are non-standardized, changeable, and combine both perpetuation and change of administrative structures. Obviously, these tasks cannot be understood solely on the basis of even the most “scientific” management knowledge available.

A more complete classification of business knowledge –into four types– is to be found in Furner and Supple (1990): 1) formal disciplinary knowledge, 2) informed or lay opinion, 3) practical knowledge, 4) general “folklore”.

Formal disciplinary knowledge is produced by empirically based, organized research. The academic community, through research and journals, and research-oriented business schools, is both the producer and the main channel of diffusion of this type of knowledge.

Informed or lay opinion, and practical knowledge, provide the “quasi-technical” heuristics and the operating “rules of thumb” for managers. This type of management knowledge translates academic findings into experience-based, problem-solving guidelines. It can also be developed the other way around: initiated by practitioners, and subsequently accepted and diffused by scholars. Management education plays a major role as producer and propagator of this type of knowledge –through business schools’ executive seminars, MBA programs, and consulting works.

An increasingly important role is played by business mass media, such as practitioner-oriented magazines, management books, and management gurus’ best-sellers, which translate into a lay vocabulary of widely held general propositions about enterprises, industries and sectors that cannot be founded on scientific knowledge.

General folklore consists of the set of myths, cultural background, and social expectations surrounding administrative knowledge and practices. By emphasizing, for instance, the role of successful leaders, organizational “best practices” and new managerial ideas, this general folklore enhances their social acceptance. The producers of general folklore are the managers themselves –through autobiographies (Chrysler’s Lee Iacocca, SAS’s Jan Carlzon, Sony’s Akio Morita)–, the few academics able to turn themselves into preachers of new managerial virtues, handbooks and popularized versions of academic findings, and the popular business media *stricto sensu*: journalists.

	Content	Producers	Propagators	Channels
Disciplinary Knowledge	Formal research Technical solutions	Academic community	Business Schools University	Academic journals Published research
Informed Opinion	Heuristics Operating rules	Business Schools' faculty Consultants	Business schools Consulting firms	Management books Conferences Seminars
Practical Knowledge	"Rules of thumb" Operating rules Managerial techniques	Business Schools' faculty Consultants Managers	Business Schools Managers Consulting firms	Business oriented magazines Business Schools Executive programs
General Folklore	Socially accepted norms Myths	Management gurus Academics Opinion leaders	Popular business media	Newspapers Magazines Handbooks

During the last 15 years, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in the relative weight of the different contents of management and organizational knowledge, and of the different channels of its transmission. Theory itself has emphasized what we called the tacit component of knowledge, becoming familiar with such tacit and non-formal concepts as culture (Peters & Waterman, 1982), learning processes (Argyris, 1993), vision and strategic intent (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994), values and beliefs (Drucker, 1992), and others.

All these concepts imply norms and “soft” organizational techniques, which refer to the less formalized part of business knowledge, thus changing the character of the business “discourse”. There has been a shift in emphasis from more scientific and technical issues to social and ideological ones, where general folklore has greatly gained in importance.

At the same time, the importance of the channels of transmission of practical knowledge and general folklore has grown. As Nohria and Eccles (1992) have noted:

(I)ncreases in the number of business schools and MBA graduates, in the number of executive training programs (by business schools, training firms, and companies themselves), in the size of the consulting industry, and in the number and circulation of business books and periodicals (more than 1,600 new books in 1990 alone) have all contributed to a greater awareness and more rapid dissemination of the latest, most up-to-date management practices.

As a less technical and less functional management “discourse” gains acceptance, the role of the popular business media becomes more important, and the need to further research their institutional characteristics increases accordingly.

The diffusion and institutionalization of business knowledge. The role of the popular business media

So far we have pointed out, first, that management knowledge has recently focused on aspects linked to the most tacit components of the business “discourse”, and second, that the business media –and especially the most popular channels, which spread precisely these non-formal components of business knowledge– have grown in importance, in both relative and absolute terms, compared with other transmitters of management knowledge. In the following pages we shall try to situate the role of popular business media within the wider context of the diffusion and institutionalization of knowledge.

The institutionalization of knowledge is an old topic for social scientists. Within the sociology of knowledge itself, a major contribution has come from social constructionists such as Berger and Luckmann (1967), who stressed the role of social dynamics in the production of shared knowledge and the issue of its institutionalization and wide acceptance.

Berger and Luckmann (1967) described three steps in the institutionalization of knowledge: 1) habitualization, 2) typification, and 3) objectivation. Habitualization occurs as a natural consequence of repeated actions, which create patterns of behavior that can be transmitted independently of the related actions. The second step, typification, regards the integration of the new patterns into the already accepted set of knowledge. It is the proper stage of early institutionalization, when new knowledge is embedded into the socially accepted knowledge set. Objectivation concludes the process of institutionalization by giving the new knowledge wide acceptance and social legitimation.

The New Institutional School of Organization Theory has studied the mechanisms of institutionalization of knowledge, beliefs, ideas, norms and values, underlining also the importance of myths and ceremonies (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and cognitive limitations (Zucker, 1977). New Institutionalists have mainly investigated the role of “institutional actors” in promoting patterns of knowledge, in spreading them effectively within the environment (Powell and DiMaggio, 1983), and in giving legitimacy to knowledge (Kieser, 1989).

New Institutional studies have mostly focussed on organizational practices, analyzing their history (Fligstein, 1990; Davis *et al.*, 1994) and their vehicles of diffusion (Mezias, 1990; Edelman, 1992). The spread of managerial ideas, and the role of business media, has received only scant attention. For instance, Chen and Meindl (1991) adopted an institutional perspective to analyze the rise and fall of leaders’ legitimacy within the national popular press; Alvarez (1991) and Furusten (1992) adopted the same perspective in analyzing, respectively, the diffusion of the Entrepreneurship Movement, and the role of gatekeepers of management books.

Although there are few studies in this area, we argue that a combination of the sociology of knowledge and the New Institutional School can be very fruitful in highlighting the business media’s role in the institutionalization of management knowledge. In order to apply this approach, our analysis will follow these steps: first, we describe the different types of business media; second, we outline their role as carriers in the business knowledge institutionalization process; third, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, we focus on the particular role of the popular business media.

The Business Media

The broadest possible definition of business media includes all the institutions, actors, and tools that work together in spreading management knowledge. This definition refers to at least five different groups of media: 1) the government and international organizations, 2) universities and Research Centers, 3) business education institutions, 4) consultants and practitioners, 5) popular business media.

By promoting the introduction of business-related disciplines in the secondary school, as in Italy, or by encouraging young people to start new businesses through fiscal exemptions, governments directly take part in the diffusion of organizational knowledge. International organizations such as UNESCO and the EU play a similar role through international cooperation programs.

Universities and research centers are obviously the academic actors in the social diffusion of administrative ideas. They are what Berger *et al.* (1973) called the “primary carriers”, that is, “the institutions that are directly concerned with technological production”. By working with the articulated part of management knowledge, academia supplies the more practical actors with part of the raw materials on which to base new popular ideas. Academic research also provides formalized answers to the problems affecting the more functional or technical activities of a company, such as financial investments, or new manufacturing techniques.

As we already mentioned, business education institutions, such as business schools, have been widely studied. In fact, the wealth of data available make them more a subject for historians than for sociologists. As institutions, they both produce and diffuse management knowledge. Business schools are the traditional link between disciplinary and practical knowledge. By teaching management to practitioners, they provide useful solutions and opinions, developed from academic sources.

Managers and entrepreneurs themselves are media for the diffusion of administrative knowledge (Baron, *et al.*, 1988) –through their example, but also through public speeches and their increasing participation in business education. This has led them to combine their traditional role as the main “consumers” of administrative knowledge with that of producers, especially in times of practical innovations and widespread entrepreneurship, when practice rushes ahead of theories and concepts.

The Popular Business Media

The literature on administrative knowledge diffusion does not provide any clear definition of popular business media. We propose to consider as popular business media all the mass media that diffuse information about business events, and about management as such, to the general public and to a relatively large audience on a continuous basis.

This category includes at least three different types of media: management books, magazines, and newspapers. Radio broadcasting and television networks should also be included, given the increased airtime dedicated to business information in news reports and special programs. However, on account of our lack of familiarity with these media, we do not propose to consider them in our discussion, which we shall limit to written media.

- *Books*

Books are the traditional carriers of new ideas. The great variety of book types which concur in spreading management and organizational knowledge reflects the extreme complexity of the publishing sector, which has been described by Coser, Kadushin, and Powell (1982).

First, there are books intended to reach the academic audience, in which scientific findings are presented. We do not consider them to belong in the popular media category. Second, there are books that translate academic ideas into a *vulgata* and are thus able to reach beyond the academic community and make the ideas available to a larger audience (Boudon, 1986). Third, there is a separate category of books written to describe the lives and deeds of managers and entrepreneurs. Frequently, these biographies or autobiographies diffuse an image of business people as heroes (Iacocca, 1984; Carlzon, 1987; Harvey-Jones, 1988), creating an “*aura*” of legend around their characters and successes, and providing new myths which both embody and spread management knowledge.

There is yet another type of popular business books: those written by management “gurus” (Huczynski, 1993) on issues such as “managerial excellence” (Peters and Waterman, 1982), and other topics related mainly to the tacit contents of managerial knowledge.

The statistics regarding this industry of popular business publishing are impressive, and presumably its impact on practice should also be enormous. For instance, between 1979 and 1987, best-selling business books appeared six times among the top 10 best-sellers in the U.S. (Huczynski, 1993).

Year	Author	Book	Rating
1979	Ruff	<i>How to Prosper During the Coming Bad Years</i>	No. 3
1980	Casey	<i>Crisis in Investing</i>	No. 1
1981	Cohen	<i>You can Negotiate Anything</i>	No. 9
1982	Naisbitt	<i>Megatrends</i>	No. 15
1983	Peters and Waterman	<i>In Search of Excellence</i>	No. 1
1984	Iacocca	<i>Iacocca: An Autobiography</i>	No. 1
1985	Iacocca	<i>Iacocca: An Autobiography</i>	No. 1
1986	Halberstam	<i>The Reckoning</i>	No. 22
1987	Batra	<i>Surviving the Great Depression of 1990</i>	No. 6

Source: *Fortune*, February 13, 1989, pp. 61-63.

Furthermore, many of these books were quickly translated for the European market, where they had similar success, to be added to the successes of European intellectuals of management, such as Charles Handy.

The success of these management books is not isolated. It has been accompanied by the success of business periodicals.

- *Business Magazines*

Business magazines have a solid tradition in the U.S. and U.K., where many weekly, biweekly or monthly magazines, aimed both at managers and at a wider audience, deal with business issues ranging from logistics or consumer products marketing to profiles of successful top managers.

In many European countries, such as Spain and Italy, business magazines proliferated during the eighties. They mainly addressed non-technical issues, in which case they were aimed at a larger audience. They provided case studies and information on successful companies, publicized new organizational practices, and gave public exposure to successful or important managers and entrepreneurs, sometimes as a part of public relations campaigns financed by these people.

In the last decade, general-interest magazines have also paid more attention to business issues. Their role of providing more “informed” opinion and building on the day-to-day newspaper analysis has made these magazines the typical *cathedra* for well-known managers and opinion leaders. Thus, they contribute to expanding and spreading managerial knowledge, generally in an easy-to-read form, and gaining acceptance for it.

- *Newspapers*

The last category of written popular business media is newspapers. In most western industrialized countries, there are long-published newspapers dedicated to business and financial information: *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times*, and *Il Sole-24 Ore* are examples.

Likewise, general newspapers have an increasing number of pages dedicated to the same kind of information about economic indicators, trends in the Stock Exchange, company performance and strategies. Many general newspapers also include a weekly supplement on economic and business affairs.

More significantly, many newspapers are starting to offer, often within these special business pages or supplements, guides to understanding the process of entrepreneurship and management itself. In this way they make the transition from information to instruction and become a vehicle for “informal” business education. Business knowledge and business education is thus brought to a general –mass– audience, effectively de-professionalizing the teaching, as well as the practice, of management.

In the following table we summarize the role of the popular business media within the dimensions discussed so far: content of business knowledge and types of audience.

	Highly specialized audience	Non-specialized audience
Tacit Business Knowledge	Management education – Business Schools – Consulting Firms Managers and Practitioners	Popular business media – Books – Magazines – Newspapers
Articulated Business Knowledge	Universities and Research Centers Academic Journals	Business schools – MBA programs Informal Business Education

The process of institutionalization and the role of popular business media

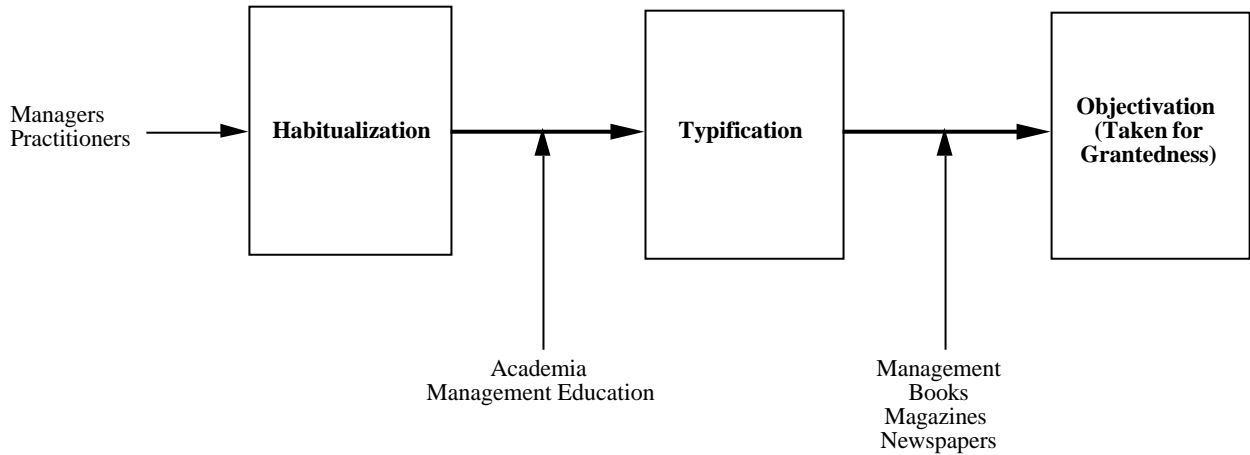
Not all of the institutions and social actors that help to institutionalize knowledge influence the process in the same ways or at the same stage. In the following pages we discuss the specific contribution of popular business media with reference to the habitualization-typification-objectivation model of the institutionalization process.

The main input for the first phase, habitualization of knowledge, is repeated actions (Berger *et al.*, 1973). In the case of business knowledge, the knowledge is first institutionalized through replications by managers and other organizational practitioners themselves.

It is in the second stage, typification, that the institutional producers of business knowledge make sense of the “polymorphic” and “malleable” *bricolage* (Bourricaud, 1980) of repeated actions. By developing patterns of explanation, academia and management education institutions provide a set of interpretations and representations of business reality which will then be institutionalized.

Popular business media transmit this set of knowledge to a larger and usually less sophisticated or less innovative portion of practitioners, to society at large, or, more precisely, to the part of the society that compose their audience. The final social acceptance and taken-for-grantedness of knowledge occur at this stage, thus completing the process of institutionalization. The promotion of a given set of business knowledge by popular business media usually begins the final phase of its institutionalization (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Huczynski, 1993).

The process of institutionalization of business knowledge



The larger the audience of the popular business media, the greater the part of society participating in the objectivation and taken-for-grantedness of business knowledge.

The role of popular business media as final diffusers of business knowledge is crucial for at least three reasons.

First, they link business knowledge to other types of local knowledge (Geertz, 1983) and other forms of knowledge that are already institutionalized within society. Locating business knowledge close to politics, local news, or sports, is not a minor event. It affects the popularization of business issues by enhancing an emotional involvement in these matters (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Moreover, such a location makes business people's interventions within those other contexts meaningful. Top managers writing on social issues, or interviewed about sports, are not rare in important general newspapers, and may have systemic consequences, as the Italian experience has recently shown.

Second, by popularizing business issues, the popular business media provide organizational actors –that is, managers and entrepreneurs– with a stronger social identity and visibility (Chen and Meindl, 1991; Alvarez, 1991). In this way, business knowledge becomes an additional tool for providing interpretations and constructions of social reality and becomes yet another social norm available to build the legitimacy of organizational actions (Ashfort and Gibbs, 1990; Elsbach, 1994) and the influence of professional groups (Baker and Faulkner, 1991; Dobbin *et al.*, 1993).

Moreover, as Barsoux (1993) describes, magazines and newspapers are increasingly a source of stories about managerial life, which are not provided by more technical literature. Although they do not deal with technical aspects, these stories mainly offer a symbolic base (Pfeffer, 1981) and a symbolic language (Astley and Zammuto, 1992) for the construction of the managers' and other organizational actors' social identity.

Third, popular business media supply their readers with business knowledge which has ideological functions. To the extent that popular business media such as newspapers, magazines and books are a platform for voicing opinions that call for new practical managerial approaches or solutions, and these opinions adopt a normative language and

“do it” or performative content, the diffusion of managerial ideas does not differ much from the diffusion of ideologies, which also contain normative propositions.

An agenda for further research

We have already underlined the lack of analysis of the role of the popular business media in developing and spreading management knowledge. Now, we would like to suggest some possible paths of research to follow on this topic.

We described the logical link between the growing influence of the tacit component of management knowledge, which is also increasingly recognized by theoretical approaches, and the larger impact of the popular business media. We outlined how these media are efficient vehicles for the transmission of the less technical or less formalized contents of administrative knowledge. This link and its historical development should be studied.

This paper centered on written media. Yet, considering that “formal knowledge remains bound by print and reading, even while popular knowledge is increasingly visual, multi-channeled, and interactive” (Swidler and Ardit, 1994), further analyses should focus on other media.

Research into this topic should also take into account that the popularization of business knowledge has consequences not only for its contents, but also for the character and role of the actors involved. The upsurge of the new group of institutionalizers of business knowledge, i.e. the popular media, takes part of the production of business knowledge out of the hands of the intellectual and academic community. This changes the patterns of social authority on knowledge, upon which objectivation is grounded.

As Star (1989) argues, it is not the “self-propelling quality of the ideas” that determines their social authority, but rather the commitment to certain ideas, notions, technologies, standards and vocabularies on the part of the communities that produce, diffuse, and adopt business knowledge. Thus, research into the social and individual actors that own the media, and the attitude of these media towards business and society, emerges as an exciting topic of research.

The manifold effects of these communities’ actions and authority on business knowledge are still open to research. Through their social authority, they control incentive systems and sanctions, the symbols, myths and ceremonies of knowledge, institutions and intellectual life. Yet very little research has analyzed in detail the actual patterns of influence, in particular of the popular business media. This is especially important at a time when both scholars and practitioner-oriented authors recognize that the “rules of the game” in the production, diffusion and consumption of business knowledge are rapidly changing.

Conclusions

Building on some overlooked issues in the development of business knowledge, we have mainly addressed three related features. First, business knowledge does not constitute a unitary body of meanings, but consists of an articulated, formalized component and a tacit, socially defined component. This basic duality frames all the uses and styles of thought related to the diffusion of business knowledge.

Second, by combining the sociology of knowledge with the New Institutional School of Organizational Theory, we have argued that different types of business knowledge use different sets of business media or channels of diffusion and institutionalization.

Third, we have related the increasing diffusion of the tacit components of business knowledge to the growing importance of popular business mass-media, and viceversa. We have also stressed the critical role of these media in the last phase of the process of institutionalizing business knowledge.

In sum, we suggest that the popular business media provide business knowledge its final taken-for-grantedness and social legitimacy. The relevance of the “tacit” features of knowledge makes social acceptance an increasingly important issue for business knowledge and practice. Therefore, there is a need for research into the diffusion of business knowledge by the popular business media. □

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