

Publishing in top journals – a never-ending fad?

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Abstract

Starbuck is critical of faddishness, and with good reason. Fads may come, and fads may go, but go they must – or must they? We look at the relentless pressure to publish in the top journals of Management Studies. There is no sign of decline, and yet such desperation to do something of value not because it is useful but because demand for it is great certainly satisfies the definition of fad. Is a fad that runs and runs still a fad?

So there are fads in behavioural and social science research (Starbuck, 2009). How surprising is that? It is not too hard to imagine academic folk reading a paper in some social science journal and being so fired with enthusiasm that they write their own paper on the subject, which is read by other academic folk, who write their own paper, and so on. Starbuck identifies four factors that would intensify this basic process, and it is difficult to disagree with his observations that the mass production of knowledge, mechanistic theories, generalisations, and the misuse of statistics could each lead to the concentration of academic research into faddish bursts of output. And yet, there is something wrong here, something about Starbuck's own generalisation that is unconvincing.

Let us start from the beginning and make clear what we are talking about. The term 'fad' is often used in conjunction with 'fashion'. Those who specialise in the study of these things are keen to point out that 'fads' peak and then quickly decline, while 'fashions' show some maturity before their fall (Thackray, 1993; Ponzi and Koenig, 2002). We are content to let the two be synonymous, describing people doing something because other people are doing it. An economist might say that fad relates demand not to supply in the normal market way, but to demand itself. Something is wanted because others want it (Strang and Macy, 2001).

So far, so good, but focus on the rise and longevity of these things may detract attention from the small print of the literature on fads, which is clear that they go down as well as up (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Carson *et al.*, 2000). In fact, fads tend to rise rapidly and then collapse even more abruptly (Ponzi and Koenig, 2002; Thackray, 1993). Starbuck pays little attention to the decline of fads, but then what he finds ‘never-ending’ is not the fad itself, but ‘faddishness’, presumably meaning characterised by fad. Are the social sciences characterised by fad? Our evidence, such as it is, comes from Management Studies rather than the whole sweep of social science, but we present it for what it is worth.

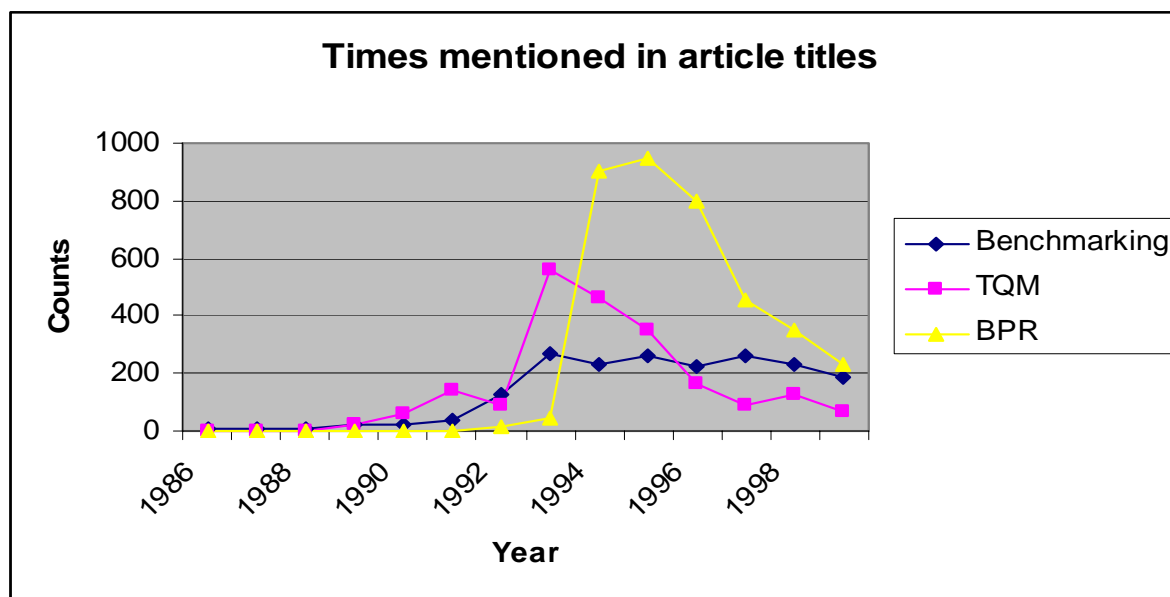
As it happens, researchers in Management Studies know a thing or two about fads (eg, Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). They study them: the management methods demanded by desperate managers, and supplied by eager management consultants (Huczynski, 1993) and half-crazed gurus (Clark and Salaman, 1996), are fads, demanded because they are in demand by other managers rather than because they are of any practical use. Those who would understand the workings of the organisation and the managerial mind investigate these fads (Watson, 1994). Does this make the research itself faddish? In a sense, yes: Business Process Reengineering (BPR) was studied as much because everybody was into BPR as because of any intrinsic value. And papers were written about BPR as much because others were writing papers about BPR.

For the academic, just as much as for the manager, BPR had more value as fad than as management method. In such circumstances, the fad can easily obscure the method and become a barrier to its analysis. Folk can get a mite tetchy when they have to justify faddish behaviour. Nick Oliver and his colleagues once questioned the contribution to firm profitability of such Japanese methods as lean management and just-in-time (Oliver, 2008). Publication of the results in three *Financial Times* articles was followed by media interest and then by coverage in engineering and business journals. Much of the last poured scorn on the findings: “I’m boiling mad about the way what has been disclosed by Cambridge University research has been presented by the press as if the whole

production management profession were a load of gullible wallabies responsible for their firms' loss of profit'. Indeed, the authors received a good deal of hate mail.

Starbuck suspects that academic methodology has contributed to faddishness. We observe that one particular method has been effective in revealing management fads. We are thinking of the simple technique of running keywords through the titles of papers in bibliographic databases. Thus did Scarbrough and Swan (2001) discover that the learning organisation had become unfashionable and had been supplanted by knowledge management. We used the same rough and ready technique to track the rise and fall of specific management methods towards the end of the last century. The results are sometimes quite dramatic.

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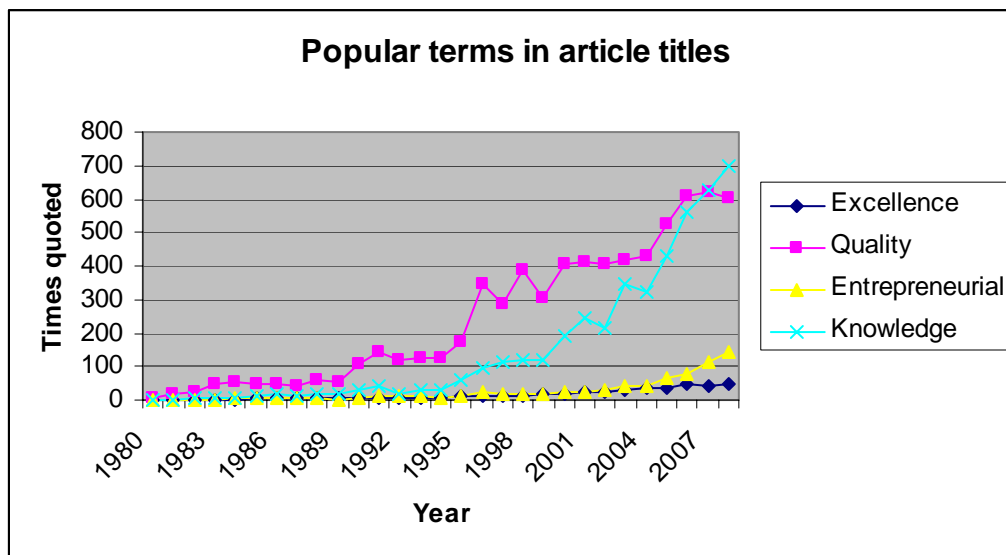


Source: ABI Inform

Of course, such method is open to criticism, not least because it is so simple. Where does the faddishness really lie - with managers or with academic authors? Perhaps all that is revealed is changing fashion in the titles of papers. And there may be something in such

criticism in that the method no longer seems to work; at least it seems to produce very different results. Can it be that there are no longer fads in Management Studies? We applied the same method to Scopus, a new bibliographic database, more comprehensive than ABI Inform. We looked at some of the weasel words of Management Studies (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996), the sort that might appeal to editors of the subject's top journals. We expected to find huge swings in fashion: instead, we found only relentless growth in their incidence, with the proportion accounted for by Management Studies increasing well beyond what its growing share of the social sciences might explain.

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Source: Scopus

Have we discovered here the beginning of never-ending fad? What might explain such an oxymoron? Well, the academic world has changed a great deal in the last couple of decades. The university has become a business competing to supply an international

market with 'education', by which is meant qualifications. Students have become customers and academics employees. University administrators have become managers, managers with the responsibility of seeing that resources are used efficiently. Trust has given way to measures of performance and league tables, the sort of quantification and statistical abstraction that Starbuck abhors. Academic research is more important than ever in this competitive environment, but academic research as measured by indicators of its performance. On success in publishing in top journals, careers are built and universities funded. This rapid and radical translation may be hard to discern in the United States, where selection and promotion committees have long calculated academic performance in terms of indicators. In the UK, though, and in many other countries now, reliance on academic performance indicators is relatively new, and the difference is stark.

Just as there are now many more students, universities, and academics, there are many more academic journals. Yet, by and large, there are no more top journals these days than were considered top journals twenty years ago. Strange, too, that, by and large, the very same journals are still the top journals (Johnson and Podsakoff, 1994, Podsakoff *et al.*, 2005). Such stability in the midst of fierce competition requires explanation. In the sciences, editors of top journals (abetted by publishers) ensure the data are fit for purpose (Rossner, Van Epps and Hill, 2007; Chew, Villanueva and Van Dr Weyden, 2007; Ronco, 2006; Young, Ioannidis and Al-Ubaydli, 2008). They are able to do this because the pressure to publish in these few top journals is great. It is great because the rewards are great. Pressure is just as great in the social sciences. If they are to be published in top journals, authors must supply editors with the sort of papers editors want (see Starbuck, 2003), and they want papers redolent with citation of their own journal, they want interminably long papers, they want papers weighed down in methodology, papers with vast literature reviews (MacRoberts and MacRoberts, 1989; Phelan, 1999). In short, they demand papers suitable for multi-purpose, universal citation, papers with content so sweeping that it is relevant everywhere, argument so vacuous that it says anything anyone might want it to say, data so impenetrable that they can be interpreted in almost any way. Thus are journal impact factors elevated, and high impact factors are the key indicator of a top journal (see Macdonald and Kam, 2007a and b).

Peer review is no safeguard against this abuse. With rejection rates of top journals often well over 90%, there can be no proper peer review. One does not have to be much better than the statisticians Starbuck castigates to realise that picking a winning horse from a field of 5 is much easier than picking the winner from a field of 20. Given that journal referees have trouble reaching consensus even when the field is small (Gans and Shepherd, 1994), journal editors are forced to expedite the process when the volume of submission is high. They invite legions of academics to submit papers in order to keep up their rejection rate (another, though lesser, indicator of a top journal), desk-reject the majority, and then fast-track a few favoured papers. Most of the papers submitted to top journals are never refereed.

“... I found it difficult to place papers in the so-called ‘best’ journals, because they already had such a huge backlog of contributions. I cannot even say that they refused my contributions for their lack of quality because they did not even look at them.” (young academic quoted in Barnard, 1998, p.479)

And which papers are favoured? Well, papers from authors who know the importance of an impact factor, authors who cite what counts, and who will be cited where it counts. Tight cliques have formed of authors whose citation is mainly to each other, and tight groups of top journals publish papers whose citation is mainly to papers in these top journals.

“... the same old researchers taking the same old line tend to get published. My experience is that there are only about three or four names in my field who get published. If you are not one of them or you are not connected with them, you haven’t got much chance.” (academic quoted in Bunting, 2005, p. 18.)

It is amusing to wonder whether pressure to publish papers in top journals is rather greater than pressure to read them. If such papers say only what has already been said, why bother to read them? Editors of top journals worry about journal impact factors, not readability. Authors worry about pleasing editors of top journals, and have little interest in readability either. Editors talk about *who* they publish; authors about *where* they publish: neither is much concerned about *what* is published. Citation is critical to both editor and author, of course, but only as a means of establishing credentials. Interminable reference lists neither direct reading, nor demonstrate what reading has been done.

Indeed, reference lists in top journals are now so long – they averaged 10 citations in the ‘seventies (Price, 1976) - that reading all that is cited would seriously impede both a paper’s production and its consumption. There are lesser journals, of course, publishing empirical papers, original research and sometimes even critical findings, but their papers will not be cited in top journals, and so there is little point reading them either. In short, the academic has massive incentive to publish in top journals, but little incentive to read them. Starbuck (2005) dares to suggest that some of these papers are not all that good: we observe merely that papers in top journals are written to be published rather than to be read.

This brings us neatly back to fad, something of value not because it is useful, but because demand for it is great. Publishing in the top journals of Management Studies is a fad, but it shows no sign at all of decline. Can a fad be enduring and still be a fad? When papers are written to be counted rather than read, there is no mechanism to generate the criticism that lays fad low, or that sparks off a new fad. Instead, there is fad without end, entrenched and fortified by the fiction that peer review and competition guarantee that top journals publish nothing but the best. Peer review requires a collegial environment: competition encourages the very opposite. Their unnatural alliance is surely among what Starbuck calls the “constant causes of never-ending faddishness”, and is surely among the reasons why, in Management Studies, fads themselves now promise to be never-ending.

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