Surges and sediments: shaping the reception of reengineering

Stefan Heusinkveld*, Jos Benders
Nijmegen Business School, University of Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9108, NL-6500 HK, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

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Abstract

The business community is continuously confronted with allegedly new concepts. These are often temporarily intensely advocated, yet are at the same time likely to be portrayed as transitory or ‘faddish’ phenomena. To trace the reception of these concepts, this paper examines the Dutch discourse on business process reengineering (BPR). Instead of showing a single transitory pattern, empirical evidence revealed a complex and multifaceted dynamic. Though BPR has been propagated extensively, it has been exploited as an umbrella to encompass divergent organizational insights. At the same time, the reception pattern of the concept varied significantly across distinct social contexts. Particularly, BPR had a significant and sustained impact within the Dutch IS community. Although the concept has been criticized since its inception, it has undoubtedly induced discourse that has been used widely to shape contemporary IS problems and solutions. As a result, this concept has played a significant role in the dissemination and understanding of organizational knowledge.

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1. Introduction

The Engineering Industry is as much subject to fashion as any other human activity, and a study of its history reveals a succession of new ideas which have swept into the industrial limelight, each being received as a panacea which is going to revolutionize production, only to make way for some newer idea still. [··] each has had its day, made some contribution to management thought, and then receded from the limelight [25]. Replace engineering by IT and this 1957 quote has been updated to today. Then, as now, managers and IT professionals were confronted with waves of allegedly new concepts, technology, and practices promising improved performance. Given this constant stream of new inventions and potential breakthroughs combined with the uncertainty this brings, IT professionals seem be either gullible or will likely have an especially favorable disposition towards well-published and ostensibly new ideas.

In an earlier issue of Information and Management, Lee et al. [86] empirically investigated the emergence and development of themes in IS research and praxis between 1991 and 1995. Although a limited number of journals and magazines were examined, the study revealed several notable changes in the intensity of
discourse on particular topics over time. As the initial widespread media attention to these ideas eventually appears to be short-lived, these concepts are quickly dismissed as hypes or fads and considered at odds with the needs of serious managers and professionals [85,98]. Nevertheless, these ideas seem to have considerable impact on both organizational discourse and praxis [75]. This has caused researchers to study ‘management fashion’ [1,3,63,77]. A management fashion is considered as a relatively transitory managerial discourse on a particular concept and organizational changes induced by, and associated with this discourse [15].

We argue that many theoretical efforts on ‘management fashions’ often fail to account for the empirical complexities involved with the reception of these popular concepts. Firstly, present literature treats a business community as a rather homogeneous entity. However, although certain concepts are widely propagated and disseminated, significant differences may occur in the uptake of these concepts within distinct professional and sectoral boundaries. Secondly, processes of re-interpretation or translation parallel the extensive dissemination of these ideas across business communities. However, most of the literature on management fashions provides limited information on the content and scope of an item in a particular social context. As a result, they may impede understanding of the meaning of a concept to a business community or the specific way it has been used. Finally, current literature tends to focus solely on the transitory nature of concepts and management knowledge. Instead, this paper suggests a more multi-faceted view in which movements of transience and persistence co-exist.

The present study concentrates on the impact of one such ‘fashionable’ concept: business process reengineering, in The Netherlands. We draw on extensive bibliographic data in order to trace the way discourse on this management issue evolved over time. This paper uses a research method that entails the simultaneous application of a qualitative survey with a quantitative analysis based on current bibliographic material. Thus, we seek not only to measure the development in the intensity of discourse on BPR but also to get ‘inside’ the discourse, and seek to understand how it has been socially constructed in a specific business community. Unlike most present theoretical accounts, this study will show a more complex, multifaceted dynamic that is continuously shaping the meaning of a specific concept.

2. Management fashion

Present, largely conceptual, accounts on ‘management fashion’ have tended to regard the incessant flow of allegedly new concepts a result of processes of supply and demand of transient management ideas in their mutual interaction. On the one hand these technologies and concepts have often been propagated by ‘fashion setters’ trying to ‘hitch-hike on a hype’ [13] and thereby enhance their business. Under the banner of an appealing label, organizational knowledge is commodified and presented as solution to most of the present-day organizational problems [47]. Often to enhance their ability to ‘flow’ within a community, concepts are launched as novel, promising ideas that will bring significant performance improvements [102].

To propagate and legitimate a fashionable idea fashion setters will seek to introduce it as an issue of contemporary managerial discourse. Discourse on these issues seems to encompass at least two important aspects. First, it is suggested that there exists a dramatic gap in performance between ‘advanced’ and ‘ordinary’ organizations [2]. The latter’s survival is threatened if they continue working in their accustomed way. Second, the fashion is presented as a rational, progressive cure-all for the performance gap, so that implementing the concept can be seen as a rational act leading progress. By referring to successful applications in prominent organizations they are portrayed as a beneficial and legitimate solution. Such arguments may impel other organizations to adopt the concept and induce actions associated with the discourse.

On the other hand, managers are continuously confronted with persistent and complex organizational problems. As certain concepts gain in popularity, these managers may feel compelled to adopt them. They then appear to be innovative and have a legitimate banner under which organizational change may be applied. Moreover, such concepts may be useful in framing organization problems and stimulating adaptive processes [28]. As a result, these phenomena
become not only extensively debated but are also regarded as a driver for organizational actions.

In most cases, popular concepts eventually become heavily criticized as wide application and scientific study reveals few of the initially promised performance improvements. As a consequence, the reception patterns of these phenomena within a business community frequently show a transitory character in which a period of uncritical euphoria is quickly followed by a phase of disillusionment [50]. Obviously, these concepts are at odds with academic ideas for building systematically and cumulatively on existing knowledge. Hence, instead of regarding managers as high quality professionals [56], these patterns easily lead one to see them as gullible and capricious, eagerly embracing these concepts in the hope of dealing with complex and persistent organizational problems.

3. Reception pattern

3.1. Surge

The swings in the popularity of organizational concepts have frequently been pictured as a rapid surge or, as Kieser denotes, a bell-shaped curve. Often following the publication of a bestseller or article in a prominent periodical, a short-lived temporarily intensive discourse emerges within a community. For example, Abrahamson reveals that the course of debate on quality circles (QC) in the United States was characterized by a sinusoid wave during the 1980s. He suggests that this discourse was mainly induced by widespread reports about excellent Japanese economic performance. Drawing elaborately on Japanese management practices, the idea of QC became an icon for the efficiency of this system of production. In the US, QC was introduced in the late 1970s. The concept received significant attention from practitioners as well as academics and the intensity of discourse grew rapidly until 1983. This was nevertheless quickly followed by a rather sharp decline towards the end of the 1980s. As a result, we assert:

Proposition 1. Immediately after its introduction, the intensity of discourse on a fashionable concept follows a short-lived surge.

3.2. Context

Although fashionable concepts are extensively propagated and transferred, the extent and the way they are received may be highly context-specific. Not only between countries [27,51], but also within a country one may find notable variations in the way a concept has been taken up. Historical analyses revealed that most surges of management discourse are largely impelled through the actions of specific professional subgroups [8]. For instance, the rise of the discourse on ‘management systems’ in the early 20th century was mainly induced by mechanical engineers seeking to enhance their profession and legitimize their ideas on organizational design [107]. Also, the evolution of specific problems and solutions are embedded in a distinct business context. For example Mueller showed that discourse on the concept of teamwork has largely been conducted within specific sectoral boundaries. These findings support the notion that the shaping of certain concepts within a country is likely to be influenced by professional and sectoral conditions [92]. Thus, we presume:

Proposition 2. The pattern of discourse about a concept may vary across different professional and sectoral communities.

3.3. Translation

Frequently management fashions are presented in a vague or rather ambiguous way. Yet, one of the most important factors for a concept’s ability to ‘flow’ is its ‘interpretative viability’ [97]. This notion implies that a concept must lend itself for various interpretations to become successful. The interpretative space makes a concept applicable to divergent situations and acceptable to different parties involved. As a consequence, travelling across different environments, the meaning of these ideas are translated and re-shaped by a constellation of particular local forces [29]. This process of translation may result in a decoupling of a concept and actions taken in its name. For example Benders and van Bijsterveld suggest that although the concept of ‘lean production’ was extensively disseminated in Germany, their local practices were significantly at odds with those at Toyota Motors in Japan [14]. Hence:
Proposition 3. Discourse undertaken under the name of a concept is likely to become loosely coupled to the original content.

3.4. The transitory nature of concepts

Management fashions tend to follow a similar short-lived pattern and are often denoted as having a transitory character. Gill and Whittle hypothesized that, though the evolution of a concept moves through a period of high enthusiasm, it eventually reaches a stage of considerable disappointment. They argue that after a period of excitement, a concept becomes heavily criticized and loses its image of a rational and progressive idea. In addition, management fashion literature suggests that the short-lived pattern of discourse parallel the way these ideas are actually received in different organizations. Initial high promises and expectations of performance improvements are, often due to disappointing applications within these organizations, quickly followed by a collapse of interest [149]. Eventually this may induce the upswing of interest for another concept. Therefore, we may state:

Proposition 4. Discourse on a fashionable concept turns from a pattern of early excitement into an increasing level of criticism and eventually enters a general rejection phase.

4. Methodology

At end of the 1980s, the term ‘Reengineering’ was used to denote several radical organizational change projects within large companies which allegedly resulted in improved business performance [55]. In the early 1990s this idea was expanded to argue that companies should use modern IT to help radically redesign their business processes to gain ‘dramatic’ performance improvement [30,52]. Mainly due to publications by prominent authors like Hammer and Davenport, the concept of BPR received considerable interest in the international business community and was regarded as one of the most important issues on the managerial agenda [22]. However, the degree of change varied between advocates of radical change and plain skeptics and critics [23].

In order to gain an empirically based insight into the Dutch reception pattern of BPR, we used bibliographic material. First, a large set of articles was collected. The September 1998 Dutch bibliographic databases of Landelijke Online Contents, KUB Online Contents, Excerpta Informatica and Management CD were searched using the key words ‘Reengineering’, ‘BPR’, and ‘Process Redesign’. Though there was some overlap in the periodicals reviewed, the different characteristics of these large databases complemented one another. The bibliographic search was repeated in June 1999. This yielded several additional records for 1998.

All Dutch publications were then extracted from the set of BPR records. Articles that outside the concept or duplicated were eliminated. Moreover, by examining reference lists a number of additional Dutch articles were found. This search resulted in 286 articles from 87 different Dutch journals and magazines published between 1991 and 1998. This set included 50 Dutch translations of articles formerly published in foreign outlets. The articles were put to the academic or practice domain [5] by considering their anticipated audience or applied research methodology [9]. After this, the professional publications were assigned to different subgroups. Here magazines were classified as outlets of General Management (gen), Personnel Management (per), Finance/Accounting (fin), or Information Technology (IT).

Finally, a sample of 111 full-text articles was generated and examined by an in-depth content analysis. The sample contained members from each sub-population. However, translations of articles formerly published in foreign periodicals were excluded from the sample. This qualitative survey allowed us to make inferences on issues such as what meaning is attributed to BPR and how has it been shaped in a particular context. Finally, we attempted to determine in what ways BPR has been criticized in the specific time period. These indications were then contrasted with evidence that BPR might have an enduring impact on management theory and business practices within The Netherlands.

5. Results

5.1. Surge

Fig. 1 shows the number of publications on BPR over time; it resembles a bell-shaped curve. This
discussion emerged in 1991 with a translation of Michael Hammer’s article from the June/August edition of *Harvard Business Review* in 1990, which was translated and was published in *Holland Management Review*. Rapidly following this article, the first Dutch article was published in the same journal in 1992 and was authored by KPMG consultants Batelaan and Vrolijk [11]. In the years following, Batelaan published several other articles on BPR in which he stayed close to the early ideas [10,12]. Subsequently, the intensity reached a maximum in 1995, followed by a sharp decrease. Apparently, local discourse on BPR in The Netherlands emerged about 2 years after the widespread introduction of the concept. Thus, in support of Proposition 1, the intensity of Dutch BPR discourse in general did show a bell shaped surge after the initial publications on the concept.

5.2. Context

Fig. 2 demonstrates that most of the Dutch literature was in the managerial media and spread over to non-managerial domains as well. The academic discourse did not start until 1994, so there is a time lag of about 3 years compared to the inception of the managerial debate. At the same time the shape of academic discourse was not sinusoidal. Specifically, in the years following 1994, it remained relatively constant, though small. When we analyzed the titles and abstracts of these academic papers, it became apparent that BPR is frequently discussed next to the intellectual property of sociotechnical systems design (STSD). So Dutch academic discourse on BPR is mainly interested in how this allegedly new concept differs from nationally established intellectual traditions of organization design.

Within practice, discourse on BPR was primarily in the realm of IT. This community was responsible for over 46% of the total volume of Dutch practitioners’ articles. Fig. 3 reveals several important features of the evolution within different business communities. Firstly, in the upswing the intensity of discourse in IT showed a more rapid acceleration and reached its maximum in 1994. Secondly, the subsets of gen, per and fin had a relatively gradual increase with a maximum in 1995 followed by a sharp decline. However, the discourse in the IT domain seems to be more persistent since there is only a slight decrease in magnitude through 1998. Consistent with Proposition 2, several dissimilarities in emergence, intensity, and persistence are revealed between different professional and sectoral communities.
5.3. Translation

In their seminal work on BPR, Hammer and Champy tried to differentiate their concept from other prescriptive approaches to organizational design by asserting that BPR is not equivalent to automation, downsizing or TQM [53]. Nevertheless, local management consultants (re)shaped the concept in their own
way and often viewed BPR as an umbrella that may encompass a large variety of organizational insights. Under the label of BPR they presented various methods and techniques for organizational design [24,65, 71,73,79,89,93,103,143]. Consider the following:

[Redesign] involves the simultaneous and coherent application of existing design principles from diverse disciplines. [...] Industrial Engineering, Sociotechnical Systems Design, Quality Management, Logistics, Information Systems and Management Accounting [95].

Also in practice a variety of ideas has been used [130]. One example of how the interpretative space has been exploited in practice is shown by a publication of a case study concerning an organizational change project at a Dutch parts distributor. This organizational change project was labeled ‘BPR’, though it was clear for the authors that several organization concepts were combined:

Different organization concepts and techniques have been used within the reorganization of NMHG’s Parts Operation: Sociotechnical Systems Design, Balance Scorecard, Viable Systems and Autonomous Teams [138].

BPR was initially presented as a radical approach on organizational change that mainly focused on ‘fundamentally’ restructuring work processes. However, a considerable amount of Dutch papers displayed a focus on human aspects of organizational analysis and redesign [57,60,64,89,94,104,105]. Culture, commitment, and communication were perceived as important variables in order to successfully redesign organizational processes [26,44,45,74,120]. Hence, a significant degree of attention concentrated also on the application of particular Change Management methods within organizational redesign efforts [16,58,59,144]. The following may illustrate this:

Bear in mind that BPR is not solely a technocratic approach but will have significant effects on the culture of the organization [76].

BPR is about people. [...] The more people are actually involved in shaping the changes, the larger the chances of success [87].

Moreover, several case studies and reports on practical applications show that BPR does not necessarily start from scratch [54,100] and outline the importance of social aspects within BPR projects [33,40,48,83,91,135–137].

During the course of the activities it became gradually clear that the motivation, knowledge and involvement of employees would be the most important critical success factors. The redesigned processes, the integral IT and especially the ambitious performance targets required a cultural change [...] [122].

Empirical results reveal that, in line with Proposition 3, the term BPR seemed to entail a large amount of divergent organizational insights. In addition, organizational changes associated with BPR offered a possibility to incorporate both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ elements.

5.4. Transitory nature of BPR

Dutch discourse is infused by critical publications that contested the ideas carried by BPR. Here, the concept has been criticized for lacking a methodological fundament on organization design and holding limited scientific foundation [84]. Besides, the initial conceptualizations of BPR are downplayed because of their inadequate attention to particular elements of change management like the development of learning capabilities, participation, culture and communication [19,106]. Some papers suggest that the concept may induce a simplified view of work processes [131,139] and creates large expectations that often result in risky approaches [18,132]. One author even asserts that BPR is morally wrong because it can be considered as a symptom of cynicism and egoism [111]. Several times BPR was compared to the Dutch approach of Sociotechnical Systems Design [80,81,99,108,133]. Most of these publications argue that BPR does not have any contribution to existing knowledge on organizational design and change management. However, the number of critical articles seem however relatively small.

At the same time, empirical results indicate that particularly in the IS community BPR has a strong base for entrenchment [150]. Here, the concept is regarded as one of the most popular and important IT related issues of the 1990s in The Netherlands [31,113,125,126]. Throughout IS discourse, there is an extensive plea to incorporate a BPR approach within systems development methods [32,41,62, 78,115,118,140,141,146]. Firstly, by propagating a process orientation, the concept furthered a
widespread recognition of the significance of analyzing cross-functional relationships [7,39,42,49,101,112,142,147,148]. As a consequence, BPR is frequently related to the implementation of various forms of IT in organizations [4,34,35,38,116,121,128,129,145] like for example Workflow Management [6,72,90,119,134] and e-commerce [61,96]. It is even postulated that Workflow is rarely introduced without a preceding BPR effort [43,117]. These contemporary technologies encompass divergent aspects of business operations and cut through often functionally designed organizations and IT systems. Here BPR provided a strong focus on work processes instead of mechanizing merely functional areas.

Moreover, the concept is regarded as valuable because of its holistic character [127]. Initiating a BPR effort offers an opportunity to conceptualize IT next to issues of strategy, structure, and people in a coherent way [20,21,37,68,70]. As a result, BPR is perceived as an advanced phase in the convergence of the IT domain and the organizational domain [109,110,123,124]. Apparently this concept contributed to the dissemination of the notion that a single focus on a pure technocratic approach of systems development and organizational change often leads to dysfunctional effects.

Not only ambition, necessity and scope of the change have to be matched, also changes in processes, technology and structure should be paralleled by changes in management systems and culture [82].

The notion that to realize such ambitions demands more from an organization than implementing changes partially we call the essence of business reengineering. It concerns ‘management by matching’, focussing on coherence [66].

Although it is argued that existing system development methodologies have incorporated insights from the BPR concept, several papers assert that the use of the specific label will gradually diminish [17,67]. Hence, empirical results portray just partial support to Proposition 4. Though there was significant opposition to BPR, the number of critical assessments has not dominated Dutch discourse and has not increased over the years. Instead, the concept has induced an extensive, and still ongoing discourse in the IS community that concentrated on analyzing business processes as well as addressing organizational and technological changes in a balanced way.

6. Conclusion

The case of Dutch BPR reception yielded several notable insights. Firstly, the initial ideas entering a Dutch business community have been ‘translated’ in various ways. Often local consultants sought to shape local ideas of BPR. Here they espoused various recipes and ‘grafted’ them on the initial rhetoric of BPR propagated by several prominent American authors. The concept has been exploited as an umbrella to propagate and legitimate the use of divergent methods and techniques on organizational design. We also saw that the initial radical ideas on restructuring business processes are often mediated by drawing on insights from change management as well as concentrating on the social aspects of organizational change.

Secondly, instead of showing a single national reception pattern, data from this study indicated that within a national context, distinct communities receive a concept in different ways. In the case of BPR, the IS discipline appears to be particularly susceptible to the ideas associated with this concept. Here BPR offered a legitimate approach to concentrate on business processes and to address both technological and organizational changes in a coherent fashion. As a consequence, IS professionals used BPR discourse to shape present-day problems and solutions concerning the exploitation of IT in organizations.

Thirdly, although current literature often stresses the short-lived character of elaborately discussed issues, this paper argues that both transience and longevity may co-exist. Apparently, introducing IT in organizations has never been an unproblematic issue [46] but turned out to be persistent, complex and of all times [114]. Still BPR managed to impel a contemporary extensive discourse on this issue. The concept offered an allegedly new solution to address these issues that, according to its propagators, would yield dramatic performance improvements. However, as these ideas are known for a long time within Dutch academic traditions on organizational design [36], concepts like BPR may be regarded as just an appealing and simplified reformulation of organizational
knowledge. Apparently ‘old’ knowledge has been recycled and presented as ‘new’ in different spatial and temporal contexts [69]. Hence, although the issues raised are not new and BPR insights may provide no contribution to the systematic accumulation of organizational knowledge, the concept came to set many present-day managerial agendas.

Within several areas the initial large attention to BPR seems to be transient and just faded away towards the end of the 1990s. Though, the IS community shows strong bases that increase the likelihood of entrenchment. We saw that elements of BPR were integrated in system development methodologies and turned out to be common practices within IT implementation projects. Here, the concept played an important part in the dissemination and understanding of organizational knowledge.

Finally, this study showed that to understand the way a concept has been received, one must consider the specific way it condensed and crystallized within a particular social context. As a consequence, we argue that a qualitative approach to studying discourse by means of an elaborate content analysis may be complementary to the often-used quantitative data. It moves a study beyond just measuring the extent with which a key word appears in a bibliographic database and merely establishing timing and intensity. Instead, we were able to trace the evolution of a concept within divergent contexts and account for the multifaceted way in which local managerial discourse shaped the meaning of a concept.

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References


Stefan Heusinkveld holds a BA in Business Economics and received his Masters in Business Administration from the University of Nijmegen, where he specialized in Organizational Analysis and Design. Currently, he is a doctoral researcher at the Nijmegen Business School, where his research focuses on the creation, dissemination and reception of management knowledge. His research interest encompasses organization concepts, history of organization theory and diffusion of management knowledge.

Jos Benders (MBA, 1988; PhD 1993) is a Senior Research Fellow at the Nijmegen Business School, Catholic University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Prior to joining the Nijmegen Business School in 1992, Jos was a PhD candidate at the Department of Business Administration of Tilburg University. In 1996–1997, he was Visiting Senior Fellow at the Department of Management of the University of Wollongong, Australia. His research interests include the development and application of organization concepts, the history of cellular manufacturing and medieval coinage. He published in such journals as Information and Management, Journal of Management Studies, New Technology, Work and Employment, and Work, Employment and Society. He is author of Optional Options: Work Design and Manufacturing Automation (1993), co-author of Useful but Unused: Group Work in Europe (1999), and co-editor of The Symbiosis of Work and Technology (1995) and Mirroring Consensus; Decision-Making in Japanese-Dutch Business (2000).