

**THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY
KNOTS AND LINKS IN THE ARENA OF MANAGEMENT FASHION**

by

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical view of the arena of management fashion setting. Responding to Clark's (2004) analysis of management fashion, the paper employs a Latourian analysis of inscription and mobilization in an attempt to demonstrate that the management fashion setting arena is both larger and more heterogeneously engineered than hitherto acknowledged. Analysing the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) and its annual best practice awards the paper argues that these awards, which both constitute and applaud best practice depend upon the mobilization and enrolment of a large and heterogeneous collective. In an attempt to explore the operation of this collective the paper attempts to tease out the links and knots, which act to constitute management fashions and to stabilise our understanding of best practice.

Keywords:

Consultants, management fashion, best practice, Latour, collective.

Introduction

In the inaugural issue of this journal, Timothy Clark (2004) argues that our ability to understand the processes whereby business strategy is formulated and implemented has been restricted by a research agenda, which focuses on the workings of a small managerial elite. Indeed, he argues that researchers have focused on the internal workings of business organizations and, consequently, have tended to overlook or underplay the role(s), which external advisors and agencies play in 'the labour of strategy' (Whittington, 2003). In an attempt to overcome this limitation, Clark promotes an analytical framework designed to 'amplify, extend and deepen our knowledge of strategy' (105) so that we might come to understand the labour of strategy as being 'a process built on an extended division of labour' (105), which reaches well beyond the normal confines of the business organization to encompass a wider network including *inter alia* consulting organizations, academic departments and publishing firms. In short, Clark argues that there is a need

to acknowledge the role(s), which members of the management fashion industry play in the strategy process. Accordingly, he suggests that we should use the interpretive lens of management fashion to shine 'an intensive light' (109) on the workings of the fashion industry so that we might come to an awareness of the 'ways in which strategy emerges as the result of a series of collaborative relationships with a number of usually unseen heads and hands' (109).

This paper wholeheartedly supports Clark in this attempt to reveal and to explore the processes, which shape and legitimate both management fashion and business strategy. However the analysis offered here is couched as a response to Clark's paper – albeit a response of a particular kind. In this respect, it is worth observing that while this paper does offer a reply to Clark's analysis, the author does not intend to construct a hostile 'response piece'. Instead the author hopes that this reply will be read as a compliment, which nonetheless seeks to complement Clark's analysis. To this end we will argue that Clark's, wholly laudable attempt to demonstrate the array of actors and actions that, together, breathe life into the labour of strategy produces an unnecessarily restrictive account of the collective that produces fashions, and so, strategies for business. We will argue that in Clark's purview the 'unseen hands and heads' that work to constitute business strategy remain unseen and effectively hidden from scrutiny. Indeed we will suggest that despite a desire to shine an intensive light upon this collective, Clark sees the 'advice industry' (Clark and Fincham, 2002) through a glass darkly.

In an attempt to shine the intensive light favoured by Clark, and so, open up the 'management fashion-setting arena' to more critical scrutiny, this paper draws attention to the existence of a complex of heterogeneous engineers (Latour, 1987; 1993) that is at once more intensively and more extensively organized than Clark has allowed. Basing the paper on interviews with the Management Consultancies Association (MCA); with representatives of member firms and with a number of industry commentators, we will focus attention on the annual 'best practice' prizes awarded by the MCA as we attempt to identify the heterogeneous engineers who, together, constitute our appreciation of good management (consulting). In this endeavour we will follow Latour's analysis of world-building (Latour, 1999a; 1999b) as we attempt to demonstrate the links and knots in this collective (Latour, 1999b) that have been overlooked by Clark, but which remain fundamental to the production and reproduction of the business of management.

Accordingly the paper is structured as follows: We begin with a brief review of Clark's account of 'the management fashion-setting arena'. Having offered this review we then move on to examine the processes of mobilization and enrolment that are fundamental to the production and reproduction of knowledge. To this end we will focus on Latour's (1999b) account of the 'links and knots' that foster the development and transmission of stabilised knowledge. We will argue that this account of experts, expertise and inscription offers a challenge to Clark's rendering of the management fashion-setting arena because it encourages us to pursue the negotiations and linkages that allow specialists to construct authoritative forms of knowledge. In

an attempt to solidify this claim we will examine the MCA and its annual awards for 'best practice' in consulting. In this analysis of the MCA we will attempt to demonstrate that these awards, which simultaneously constitute and applaud best practice, forge and rely upon an extensive and heterogeneously engineered complex that extends well beyond the limits of the arena sketched by Clark. Finally the paper concludes with brief suggestions for future research.

The management fashion-setting arena

In his analysis of *Strategy viewed from a management fashion perspective*, Clark (2004) offers an interesting and largely persuasive account of the limits of current scholarship on business strategy. Noting that scholars of strategic management have tended to operate with an Olympian model of management (Whittington, 1993), which views the labour of strategy as the effective domain of a small, organizational elite who work *within* the host organization (albeit with the benefit of a cosmopolitan outlook), Clark observes that there is a need to acknowledge the inspiration, support, assistance and guidance that these actors receive from outside agents and agencies. In short Clark seems to suggest that scholarship on strategic management has a paradoxical quality inasmuch as it a) suggests that managers must craft strategies that reflect (to a greater or lesser degree) the wider environment of business yet b) simultaneously denies these actors access to the tools, templates and resources vital to the labours of strategy, which his analysis of the 'advice industry' (Clark and Fincham, 2002) suggests are abundantly available in the extra-organizational arena.

To overcome this unnecessarily introspective account of the processes of strategy formulation and development, Clark suggests that we should accord a role to the agents of advice and fashion because, he argues, these actors surround *and* suffuse the business organizations which strategy theorists have attempted to portray as separate and sovereign entities. In an attempt to identify the key members of this management fashion-setting community he offers a graphic portrayal of the management fashion-setting arena that is reproduced below in figure one.

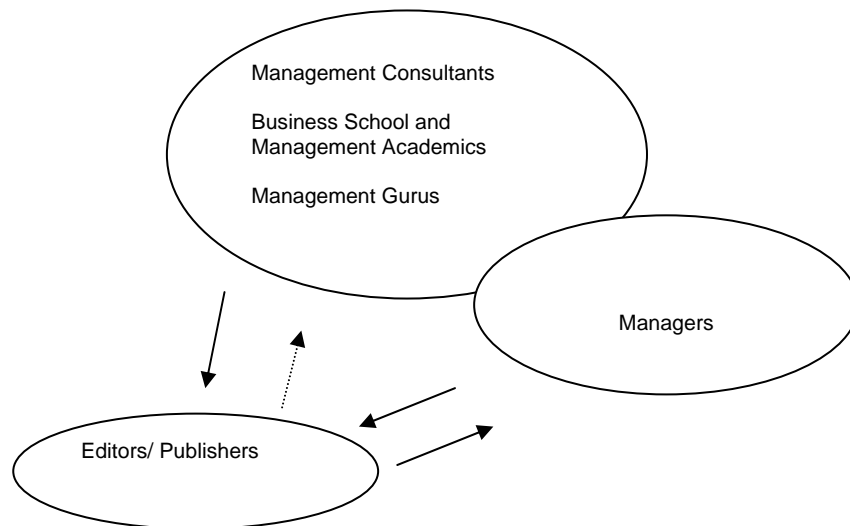


Figure one:
Clark's (2004) model of 'The dynamics of the management fashion-setting arena'

In this representation of the management fashion-setting arena Clark offers a fluid and dynamic appreciation of the processes of strategy and fashion development insofar as he

- a) acknowledges the influence which editors and publishers have on the shape and tone of management texts

- b) alludes to the roles which conferences and conference organizers play in setting the agenda for appropriate forms of work in the management field
- c) understands that the members of the fashion-setting community both produce and consume; receive and translate advice
- d) recognises that managers, far from being the passive recipients of fashion, co-fabricate and actively consume the products of the advice industry.

Yet Latour's analysis of the world building (Latour, 1999a) endeavours of specialists suggests that this diagrammatic representation of management fashion offers an unnecessarily truncated rendering of the fashion-setting arena. Indeed, Latour's analysis suggests that Clark reduces the 'three ring circus' that is the management fashion-setting arena to a mere sideshow.

Inscribing reality

Analysing experts and expertise, Latour offers a challenge to those who assert that scientists (including those of the social scientific persuasion) simply report on the reality of the outside world. He argues that far from reporting on a reality –out there - scientists are involved in projects, which seek to promote, defend and account for representations, which make claims to truthfulness. Thus Latour argues that experts are involved in 'world building' projects (Latour, 1999a) in that they seek to inscribe the very nature of reality for others. Reviewing the working patterns and processes of specialists in the scientific arena, Latour offers an account of inscription that is portable and which may be translated to reflect and account for the behaviour of other

specialist fields of endeavour such as management and management consulting (see Collins, 2004). In offering this analysis of experts and expertise, Latour observes that the lone specialist is a contradiction in terms because specialists rely on a collective of allies to establish their authority as spokespersons. In an attempt to pursue the links and alliances that authorise specialists to articulate, therefore, Latour (1999b) argues that the processes of inscribing reality turn upon the mediation of five related elements, which he portrays as a series of inter-locking loops or orbits(see figure two).

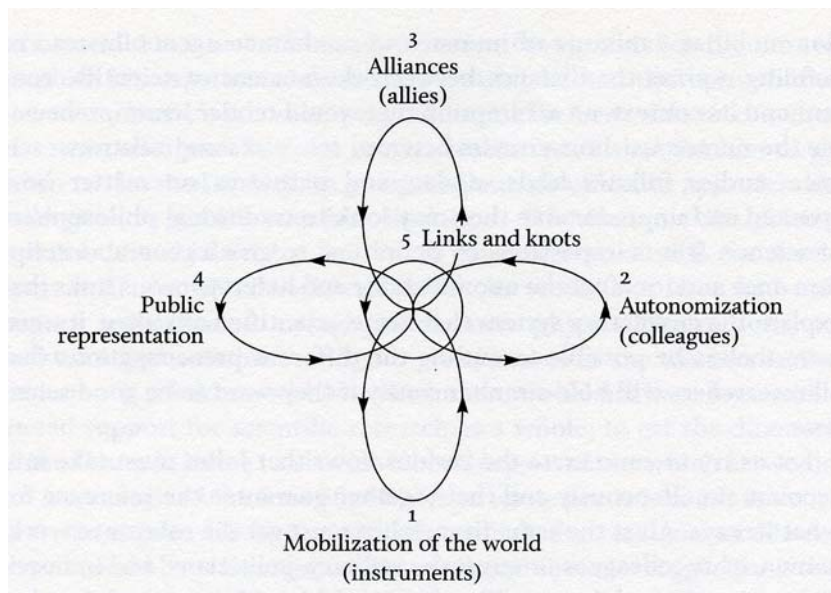


Figure two:
Latour's (1999b) model of the circulatory system of scientific facts

These loops are, namely:

Mobilization

Autonomization

Alliances

Public representation

Links and Knots

Mobilization

Latour argues that through the process of mobilization the outside world is brought into the laboratory and is made to revolve around the scientist.

Studying the works of such scientific luminaries as Pasteur, together with the works of lesser known, contemporary scientists involved in the analysis of a controversy concerning the fate of the Bolivian rainforest, Latour (1999b) observes that the practice of modernist science, while founded upon the rhetoric of detached observation actually obliges the scientist to engage in a range of, often technically demanding labours designed to render a natural world that is suitable for the ordeals of modern scientific practice. Looking in more detail at this process of mobilizing nature, Latour notes that different disciplines employ different strategies in their approaches to mobilization. In the 'hard' sciences for example, he suggests that the scientist maintains his/her centre-stage position and keeps the object of their inquiries in motion around them by embarking on such things as 'expeditions' designed to collect, order, label and return specimens from the field. In the 'softer' sciences, Latour argues that the field is mobilized and specimens are generated through the use of data collection tools such as surveys and questionnaires.

Reflecting this appreciation of the many labours involved in rendering nature amenable to scientific practice, Latour argues that scientists must construct, name and mobilize the worlds they appear merely to observe. Thus he suggests that what we conventionally regard as data is more properly thought of as *sub lata*. Or, more plainly Latour argues that the 'findings' of scientists should really be regarded as 'achievements'.

Autonomization

Latour, as we have seen, suggests that the lone specialist is a contradiction in terms. Specialists, he argues, have no authority when they stand alone because they depend upon colleagues to agree terms of reference and standards of conduct and measurement. Such negotiated settlements, Latour argues allow the collective, as a whole, to explore, expand and resolve data controversies.

Given the specialist's obvious need for colleagues, Latour suggests that autonomization – or more plainly, the production of a regulating institutional body such as a college - must be regarded as a key element of inscription. Indeed, he warns us that in the absence of a college of collaborators there can be no field of study since there will be no agreed criteria of relevance and no common standards available for the evaluation of scientific labours.

Alliances

Whereas Latour's first two loops of inscription deal with separation – the first with the separation of the messy and external world from the orderly and antiseptic world of the laboratory, and the second with the development of an academy separate from, and superior to, the world of the lay-observer (see Latour, 1987) – Latour's third loop deals with a process that seeks to reopen and enlarge the collective concerned with the taming of the world and the mobilization of *sub lata*. Discussing a range of key scientific and technical moments/ movements - the mapping of DNA (Latour, 1987); Boyle's vacuum (Latour, 1993); and Pasteur's microbes (Latour, 1999b) – Latour argues that

these scientific developments turned upon the production and enrolment of large collectives of humans and non-human hybrids. Furthermore, he notes that these collectives effectively extend the scientist's labours well beyond the confines of the laboratory.

Discussing the importance of such networking activity, Latour notes that the linkages forged with human and non-human elements of a wider collective provide the scientist with authority and precedent (Latour, 1993). Indeed on the issue of precedent, Latour observes that Boyle's attempts to establish the nature of the vacuum by means of experimentation and observation actually depends upon an extensive network of allies and alliances that ultimately links Boyle's laboratory with Clarendon's jurisprudence and the House of Lords (Collins, 2004).

Public Representation

In studies of the social construction of science, the labours of scientists and the machinations of their academies are often discussed in relation to a social world. This social realm is generally acknowledged as having a capability to shape and/ or temper the conduct of science. Nevertheless, this social sphere is typically regarded as being separate from the world of science. Latour however, does not accept this artificial separation of the social and scientific realms. The 'outside world', he argues, is very much a part of the world of science. Indeed he argues that the, apparently, separating practices of mobilization and autonomization actually depend upon the on-going faith and goodwill of a larger public that must be cast from *and yet drawn into* the

scientific colleges and academies. Illustrating this point, Latour notes the dependency of French molecular-biological science on the annual telethon funding efforts of a cystic fibrosis charity and argues that scientists remain at the centre of a moving universe and scientific academics remain viable as such, only so long as they are able to produce representations that will engage and enrol the larger public.

Links and knots

Latour's account of 'links and knots' provides both the nucleus (see figure two) of the inscription process and an overview of the machinations of scientific endeavour for it draws our attention to the ways in which those who would inscribe worlds in our name must collect, order and manage a world composed of 'data, colleagues, allies and spectators' (Latour, 1999b: 108). Noting the importance of this potentially obstinate and disorderly world, Latour argues that concepts become scientific, collectives become academies and inquisitive minds become authoritative voices when they are able to 'churn, steer, move and connect' (Latour, 1999b: 108) these disparate elements into a co-ordinated collective.

Challenging modernist notions of science, therefore, Latour suggests that while studies of scientific practice tend to focus upon laboratory bench-work as a lonely pursuit, the work of the scientist and his/ her claims to authority actually turn upon the reckoning of a larger and more heterogeneously engineered collective. Thus Latour argues: 'A concept does not become scientific because it is farther removed from the rest of what it holds, but

because it is more intensely connected to a much larger repertoire of resources' (108). Analysing the processes whereby experts forge realities and build worlds for others, therefore, Latour argues that the process of inscribing reality is a collective product, which is formed and stabilised whenever specialists are successful in their attempts to link data, colleagues, allies and spectators in an orderly collective.

In the section that follows we will attempt to build upon Latour's insights on the 'ties which bind' as we examine the MCA and its annual awards for best practice. Noting that these prizes awarded in the name of the MCA, mobilize and depend upon a large and heterogeneously engineered collective, we will attempt to demonstrate that the management fashion-setting arena extends well beyond the confines delimited by Clark as we seek to identify important links and knots in this collective.

The MCA

The Management Consultancies Association (MCA) is a trade organization. It was formed in 1956 with four founding members who, at that time, accounted collectively for 75% of the UK consulting industry. At the time of writing in 2004 the MCA has 43 members whose combined fee income of £5.8 billion is estimated by the association to account for 60% of the overall UK consulting market, which has been valued at £10 billion. Members of the MCA, the association claims, offer services to 'most' of the companies listed on the FTSE 100 and to all departments of HM Government.

To qualify for membership of the MCA, businesses must be involved in the provision of independent consulting services and must agree to abide by a code of ethics and professional standards, which amongst other things, seeks to define and regulate 'professional independence'. In addition the association sets further criteria for membership in relation to the stability and longevity of individual consulting organizations.

The association, it would be fair to say, exists to:

- promote the activities of its members
- provide the membership with a voice in/ to the media, industry, commerce and government
- provide the membership with opportunities to network with other members, potential clients and potential employees
- provide the membership with up-to-date information and research on the nature of the consultancy industry and on its emerging trends and problems/ opportunities
- enhance the stature of the industry through the development and maintenance of codes of conduct and professional standards.

In an attempt to further the general aims and standing of the association, the MCA established in 1996 an annual award for 'Best Practice'. In 2004 it awarded prizes for best practice in the areas of

- Information Technology
- E-business, Outsourcing
- Organizational Development
- Human Resources
- Strategy and Business Transformation

- Marketing
- Customer Relationship Marketing
- Production and Services Management.

In addition the MCA also awarded a prize to a company judged to be the 'Best Overall Winner'.

In 2005 the MCA will make 'gold', 'silver' and 'bronze' awards to companies that can demonstrate 'best practice' in the areas of:

- Business Strategy
- Change Management
- Electronic Trading
- Human Resources
- Marketing
- Operational Performance
- Outsourcing Consultancy
- Technology Exploitation.

In addition the MCA will make a 'platinum' award to the best overall entry and will, furthermore, make a special award to the best small consultancy (employing less than 50 consultants).

To enter the awards process, consulting firms must, with the agreement of their client, submit a 2000 word case study that demonstrates the partnership between consultant and client; details the problem faced; the solution developed and the quantifiable and intangible benefits of the consulting engagement. The consulting organizations may choose to write these case reports themselves or they may enlist the assistance of a professional (ghost) writer. To assist in this authoring process, the MCA produces a detailed *pro forma*, which indicates clearly the structure and minimum content expected of

the cases studies submitted. Thus potential entrants are informed that their submissions must include the following headings, which are used to suggest further topics and content (see figure three).

Executive Summary (maximum 200 words)

Project background

- Client organisation
- The problem/ opportunity
- Project objectives

Approach proposed by consultants

- How innovative was it?
- Application of management skills/ knowledge

Success factors and challenges

- How were the challenges overcome?
- To what extent were project objectives met?
- What were the quantifiable outcomes (strategic/ financial)?
- What were the intangible benefits?

The client/ consultant relationship

- How did this work?
- Client testimonials

Figure three:
MCA pro forma for entries to the annual 'best practice' awards 2005

For the 2005 awards the case studies will be screened by the 'Durham Consulting Group' (DCG), which the MCA describes as a network of practitioners, clients, scholars and policy-makers based in and around the University of Durham. This body, we are told, will evaluate the submitted case studies against five criteria:

- Clarity of language
- Application of management skills/ knowledge
- Achievement of project benefit
- Realisation of benefits
- Quality of client relationship

and will compile a shortlist of potential winners. This shortlist will be passed to the judging panel, which will call upon the services of representatives of the

Financial Times, the Audit Commission, the polling organization MORI, Sainsbury's, the Office of Government Commerce (OGC), the banking industry and Timothy Clark to name but a few. Those submissions judged to have fulfilled the criteria will, this year, be condensed and published by *Management Today*. In order to assist the winning companies in the production of materials suitable for general publication, the winning organizations will be partnered with staff writers or free-lance authors working on behalf of the journal (in 2004 the winning cases were written up and produced by *The Guardian*).

This brief introduction to the MCA and its annual best practice awards notes linkages between the MCA and a long list of collaborators including Government, commerce, the media and academia. As we shall see, the development and articulation of these linkages suggests that our understanding of good management, viable strategies and best practice in the field of consulting is being shaped and reshaped by many more heads and hands than Clark's account of the management fashion-setting arena has allowed. In the section that follows we will revisit Latour's account of the links and knots that bring data, colleagues, allies and spectators together as we attempt to reveal the heads and hands involved in this extended division of labour.

The wider arena

Mobilization

As we saw in our discussion of Pasteur and the Bolivian rainforest (Latour, 1999b), scientists do their best work a) when they are able to render the world knowable and meaningful through processes of separation, labelling and ordering and b) when they can make these elements revolve on an axis shaped by their concerns. In awarding prizes for best practice in management consulting the MCA has had to mobilize a collective that includes the membership of the association, non-member consulting firms and the clients of these various organizations. It has furthermore, successfully mobilized these complex organizations in a project where each respectfully submits to a process of examination that, itself, turns upon a willingness to accept that the processes of change and the dynamics of consultant-client relations might be reduced to 2000 words and four headings (plus an Executive Summary of course). In short, the MCA has made the world come to it in a reduced, catalogued and cost-effective format. And has successfully persuaded this re-engineered world to revolve around the key, mission objectives of the MCA.

Autonomization

To judge the entries submitted, the MCA has artificially sub-divided the world of consulting and the expertise of the consultant into discrete areas of specialisation (see Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). Through this programme of separation and division; through the development of *pro formas*; and through the publication of the criteria by which it will judge entries, the MCA

has, in effect, constructed terms of reference, criteria of relevance and standards for 'best practice' in consulting. In seeking to institute such standards the MCA recognises that the collective must be policed and maintained. To this end it must rely upon the good offices of the DCG while obliging members of its adjudication panel to agree and abide by a code of conduct. Following Latour such attempts to institute terms of reference, standards of conduct and criteria of relevance should be viewed as an attempt to establish an autonomized college of experts whose primary function is to establish the validity of the MCA's awards and the legitimacy of its prize-winners.

Alliances

To make its best practice awards, in any sense, worthy, the MCA has, while working hard to produce a closed world of criteria, standards and standardised methodologies, had to open its doors to those who can provide a general level of support for this project. It has, therefore, sought to forge alliances with individuals, collectives and other 'hybrid actors'. It has, for example, reached out from London to Durham in its attempts to establish legitimacy, objectivity and hence authority for its judgements. And in the formation of its adjudication panel it has reached out from its seat in Whitehall to build links with the OGC, the Audit Commission, the Cabinet Office, the press, the consulting industry, and the banking industry to list only a few of those who will be called to testify.

Public representation

Reflecting Latour's understanding that collectives of the great and good require public endorsement if they are to keep the (named and reordered) world in orbit around them, the MCA has taken steps to ensure that the activities of its collective reach the general public in a format that is lucidly rendered and hence engaging. For example, in 2004 the winning organizations were each written up for the *Guardian* national newspaper by a team of staff writers and free lance authors. For the 2005 awards the MCA has taken steps once again to secure an appropriate public representation of its aims, concerns and outlook by forming an alliance with *Management Today*, the house journal of the *British Institute of Management*.

Links and knots

Clark's review of the management fashion-setting arena drew attention to the activities of consultants, gurus, academics, publishers, editors and, of course, managers in the labour of strategy. In addition he alludes to the roles, which conferences and conference organizers play in the production and reproduction of management. However our analysis of the MCA and its best practice awards suggests that the arena which sets management fashion is at once much larger and more heterogeneous in its engineering than Clark has allowed. Indeed our review of the machinations which constitute best practice at the MCA suggests that these awards depend upon the continuing articulation (Latour, 1999b) of a collective, which links Durham with Whitehall; industry with academia; government with commerce; and the wheels of industry with the wheeling and dealing of the entertainment industry in an

extended chain designed to bring the outputs (and only the outputs) of the endeavours formed within and between these linkages to public notice and approbation. An attempt to represent the important knots within this chain is reproduced in figure four.

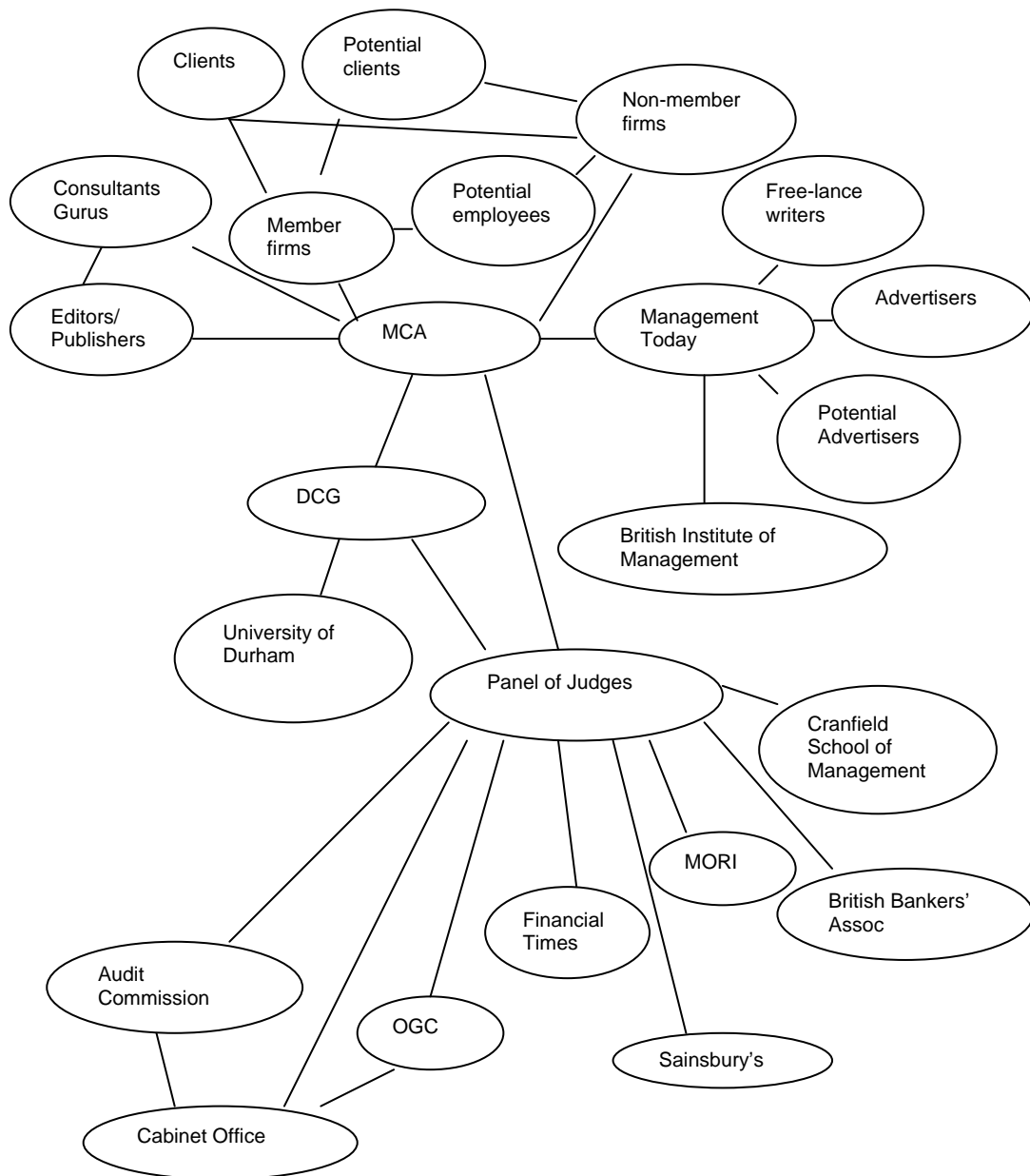


Figure four
Knots in the MCA collective

Concluding Comments

This paper has sought to identify and explore what Clark (2004) has termed 'the management fashion-setting arena'. Whilst conceding that neither the MCA nor its awards for 'best practice' actively seek to create new management fashions, we have nonetheless treated the MCA and its wider

collective of data, colleagues, allies and spectators as a fashion-setting arena. We have adopted this approach for it is clear that in its attempts to constitute and applaud 'best practice', the association has, in common with those normally recognised as primary agents of management fashion, constructed and cast a net designed, simultaneously, to threaten and to salve managerial anxieties concerning identity and performance (Abrahamson, 1991; Huczynski, 1993; Grint, 1994; Clark and Salaman, 1996; Jackson, 1996).

Reacting to Clark's attempt to delineate the key actors in this arena we have built an alliance with Latour to demonstrate that the arena of management fashion-setting is much larger than hitherto acknowledged. Analysing the MCA 'best practice' awards we have produced an analysis, which suggests that management fashion – viewed as an attempt to stabilise knowledge and constitute practice – is set, not as Clark would have it in the editor's office, nor in the guru's study. Instead, through our analysis of the MCA we have attempted to demonstrate that management knowledge and the technologies of managing are constituted and reconstituted in the links and knots of a much larger collective of actors, actants and institutions who, together, form a college. Furthermore we have attempted to show that the large and heterogeneously engineered college established by the MCA has been designed, simultaneously to (re)constitute management; to examine the fabric of management fashion; and to test the mettle of those who must work through, with and around the changing technologies of managing.

It is hoped that future research on management fashion might acknowledge the existence of similarly extensive collectives in an enlarged arena of management fashion-setting and in so doing, might employ Latour's work on experts, expertise and inscription to:

- resituate our understanding of management's specialists
- follow experts and ideas as they travel throughout their collectives
- reflect upon the role of non-human hybrids in the development of management fashion

so that we might come to a new appreciation of the many knots and links that bind each of us to fashion movements such as the pursuit of best practice.

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