Making a Niche: The Marketization of Management Research and the Rise of "Knowledge Branding"

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In this essay, we discuss an underexplored and consequential aspect of management scholarship that we term "Knowledge Branding". Knowledge Branding refers to forms of market-oriented work undertaken when creating, maintaining and developing niches of research. We consider some of the conditions and consequences of Knowledge Branding in the formation and expansion of management research sub-fields, and then suggest how its more damaging effects might be mitigated.

We invite participation in a "difficult conversation" about the culture of market-oriented knowledge production in management research, not only by raising uncomfortable questions about its grip on our field but also because we acknowledge our complicity in what we discuss. One of us (Hugh) has had an academic career spanning four decades, has been keenly observing the evolution of management scholarship, and has been questioning recent trends such as the commercialization and marketization of higher education, the commodification of academic labour, and the rise of managerialism evident in the use of performance measurement systems such as journal lists. At the same time, he has served on panels responsible for evaluating business and management research (e.g. the UK research evaluation exercises, RAE and REF). By associating funding more directly to short(-ish) term performance metrics, such exercises are seen to have accelerated the marketization of research that we consider here. The other (Afshin) has started his academic career relatively recently. He has closely and personally experienced and observed the intensifying pressures upon Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to maximize "hits" in "top" journals that are fuelled by the importance placed by 'consumers' (students)

and managers (deans, appointment and promotion committee members) on rankings of business schools and universities.

Writing this essay was prompted by our reflections on the process of preparing and revising a paper for a special issue of *Journal of Management Studies* dedicated to "Political CSR" (Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, & Spicer, 2016). Our participation in a number of workshops, conference sessions, and the review processes in relation to the preparation and revision of the paper led us to reflect in a more sustained way upon a process that we believe to be consequential in the rise of Political CSR, and that we characterize as Knowledge Branding. Based on personal experiences and discussions with a number of colleagues, we have come to believe that Knowledge Branding exerts an increasing influence in the formation and expansion of management research sub-fields which we term Knowledge Brands (KBs). Examples with which we have more familiarity include "Political CSR", "Strategy-as-Practice", "Institutional Logics" and "Institutional Work". There are also methodological KBs, such as the "Gioia Methodology", that cut across diverse sub-fields. This list is by no means exhaustive and it would be surprising, in the context of intensifying competition to occupy the restricted spaces in "top" journals, if the phenomena of Knowledge Branding and KBs were absent from other management sub-disciplines (e.g. finance and marketing) or other fields of the social sciences.

We are not taking issue with the disciplinarity of research in management and the lifecycle of sub-disciplines that have been explored and debated extensively by others. Nor do we seek to reflect on the role of management academics (along with consultants and other professional groups) in developing and marketing managerial techniques and in giving rise to "management fashions" (Abrahamson, 1996). Instead, our essay foregrounds the nature and effects of an intensification of market-based organizing in the establishment and

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consolidation of management research sub-fields. We do not suggest here that Knowledge Branding is a wholly new phenomenon. We do believe, however, that it is becoming more widespread and significant as an outcome, but also as a medium, of the intensification of market pressures and managerialism in our field. If our speculative observations resonate with our readers, then we hope that our sketch of Knowledge Branding will prompt more systematic scrutiny and evaluation of its operation and effects.

Identifying Knowledge Branding

To establish and maintain KBs requires diverse forms of knowledge branding work by founding "academic entrepreneurs" as well as maintenance and renewal activity by their pro-sumers (producers/consumers). The latter are predominantly ECRs who contribute to KBs' consolidation and expansion. Simultaneously, they reap the benefits of its "consumption". Such entrepreneurial and developmental work includes:

- Coining a distinctive buzzword so that the work of its founding "academic entrepreneurs" becomes an obligatory point of passage for identifying research published within the niche
- Competitive differentiation and (re)positioning of the niche against sub-fields addressing similar issues with the goal of territorial expansion and maintaining competitive advantage
- Centralized control of the contents and boundaries of the KB in order to raise the profile of the brand, maximize its appeal and maintain the founding entrepreneurs as holders of power, and primary beneficiaries of reputational/career dividends within the KB

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- Marketing and promotion of the KB through advocacy of the brand in major conferences and outlets, and by guiding formulaic, brand-building scholarship through journal editorial/review processes

- Establishing and sustaining a KB supply chain in the form of access to dedicated sessions in major conferences and highly ranked distribution outlets (and, in some cases, establishing journals dedicated to the KB)

- Continuous "risk management" through engaging selectively with critics of the KB – either by incorporating incremental refinements, or by ignoring more radical/fundamental challenges to the credibility of the brand

We do not claim here that all KBs enact all of these forms of entrepreneurial and developmental work, or pursue them with the same intensity of calculation or dedication. Rather, the above list aims to provide an initial framework for examining and evaluating the nature and dynamics of Knowledge Branding. We turn now to the key issue of how Knowledge Branding influences who we are as researchers, and how we do research.

Corrosive effects of Knowledge Branding

The intensification of Knowledge Branding has implications for how knowledge is organized and produced. Notably, in our assessment, detailed below, it contributes to the creeping conservatism and loss of relevance that afflicts management scholarship.

1. *Self-Serving, centralized governance*: To ensure the continued appeal and legitimacy of their KB, the founding "academic entrepreneurs" continuously adjust its tone, boundaries and research agenda. This is mainly achieved through publications such as introductions to special issues or sections in "top" journals

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and/or to edited volumes. For example, Scherer et al's. (2016) introduction to a special issue of JMS on Political CSR sets out "PCSR 2.0" - an updated release of the original KB (Palazzo & Scherer, 2008; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) – that redefines the boundaries and selectively responds to some (less radical) critiques of Political CSR. Control of KBs by a limited number of scholars reproduces divisions and inequalities, especially when it positions the "pro-sumers" of KBs, who are frequently ECRs, as silent beneficiaries of, or foot soldiers for, successful branding, while excluding the more critical voices from KBs' elite network of agenda setters and gatekeepers.

2. *Introverted relevance:* Typically, when the focus is on branding and market success, there is minimal interest in, or attention to, the social relevance of the research outside academia as this is rarely of much material consequence for the pursuit of career as defined by university managers and reputation auditors. Self-referentiality is reinforced by journals that, at best, pay lip service to the relevance of research beyond academia (as bemoaned by those lamenting the sacrifice of relevance at the altar of rigor). Knowledge branding, in other words, aggravates the crisis of relevance in management research, and especially among the so-called "top journals". This self-referentiality is of additional concern when research is publicly funded.

3. *Co-optation by dominant value regimes:* At first glance, new KBs may seem to challenge established wisdom by developing work that marks a departure from dominant approaches. On closer scrutiny, however, the intent to achieve a rapid penetration of the publication market by establishing a recognizable brand incentivises a preparedness to accommodate mainstream assumptions and

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expectations of scholarship. To continue with the example of "Political CSR", key articles that establish its boundaries claim to engage with the "politics" of CSR, contrasting it to "philosophical" and "instrumental" CSR traditions. However, on examination, "Political CSR" reaffirms private, corporatized and procedural forms of governance (e.g. "deliberative" multi-stakeholder initiatives) as crucial for filling the "regulatory gap left behind by the state" (Palazzo & Scherer, 2008; Scherer et al., 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). "Political CSR" accommodates "apolitical" research methodologies and perpetuates a neoliberal orientation that side-lines the interventionist, regulatory role of the state, and is largely indifferent or oblivious to the voice of the affected and the marginalized.

4.   *Entrenching Conservatism and marginalizing provocative research*: For ECRs facing intense pressures to produce what is publishable in "top" journals, and thereby demonstrate their research-active credentials, the opportunity to be groomed in the service of KBs can be difficult to decline. Rapid clustering of scholars (especially ECRs) around KBs provides security, but at the price of clone-like uniformity, conservatism and hyper-dependence, further compromising meaningful pluralism in terms of questions, methodologies, theories, and politics. Pro-sumers enrolled by a KB further contribute to its conservatism by assuming promotional and gatekeeping roles. For example, in our various personal experiences with KBs and discussions with several colleagues, we have observed how, in defence of territory, the pro-sumers of KBs acquire a trained and self-interested incapacity to be receptive to work that does not position itself as a contribution to their KB, let alone to scholarship which challenges, and so threatens to disrupt, the KB's assumptions and claims. At best, such work is then 'exiled' to the periphery of the academic field where it is destined to have low visibility, not

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least as a consequence of its exclusion from KB citation collectives. Editors are complicit in these processes insofar as they allow or welcome use of their journals as channels for promoting KBs as this offers an effective way of raising citation scores, and thereby improving their standing in various journal listings.

We recognize that these effects are not exclusively attributable to the intensification of Knowledge Branding and proliferation of KBs. However, by drawing academic work into fairly discrete and homogeneous pools, KBs exemplify and further institutionalize a deficit of imagination, creativity and relevance in management research bemoaned by numerous commentators in recent years. Assuming that our analysis of the Knowledge Branding phenomenon is at least partially credible, the pressing question then is: how can its deleterious effects be mitigated?

Can we contain Knowledge Branding, and how?

Where academic freedom and collective self-determination are being eroded by the symbiosis of market-oriented pressures and managerialist responses to them, we acknowledge that the appeal of Knowledge Branding is difficult to resist. Nonetheless, it is our belief that, as editors, referees, reviewers, assessors, gatekeepers of appointments and promotions, and citizens of our academic community, we still retain a (weakened) degree of autonomy, or self-regulation, sufficient to detect, challenge and perhaps check some of the more corrosive effects of Knowledge Branding. The exercise of this autonomy requires the political will to go against the tide of market-based pressures in the form of impact factors, journal lists and rankings that increasingly influence all aspects of our academic lives, including the ranking-as-reputation status of our publication outlets, departments and universities. Since the development and application of such counteracting

measures depends on the specific social/political/epistemic settings of academic work, we are somewhat hesitant to offer general remedies. With this caveat, we outline four possible moves that, in combination and with regard to situational contingencies, may offer ways of slowing down, and perhaps reversing, what we have diagnosed as the consequences of Knowledge Branding.

1. *Collectivizing reflexivity:* To increase our collective consciousness about the trajectory of our research and the evolution of our field, it is necessary to devote more time and resource to the collective questioning of politics and relevance of different sub-fields. Such questioning can help us to: make explicit both the conception of research that structures the KB and its underlying and taken for granted values; expose the branding work of the founding academic entrepreneurs and its implications for scholarship; examine the KBs' governance structures, and the inclusion or exclusion of alternative voices in setting agendas and gate-keeping; evaluate the KBs' openness to alternatives bodies of knowledge with different politics and methodologies; assess the relevance (widely defined) of KBs, giving consideration to which actors and/or types of scholarship benefit from, or are disadvantaged by, the epistemological and political agenda of KBs. These are some first steps for scrutinizing the influence of KBs. To facilitate a deepening of collective reflexivity, we urge those responsible for the agenda of curricula, journals and conferences to dedicate more space and visibility to examining and problematizing the social organization of knowledge production across our field.

2. *Decentralizing the governance of KBs*: To reverse further centralization of agenda setting and knowledge flows in sub-fields of management, we call for an opening up of (well-established) KBs by urging scholars with varying political and

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methodological backgrounds to engage with them (e.g. by hosting workshops, conference streams and special issues dedicated to their examination). The intention is to explore, develop, expand or dismantle niches by including scholars with a wider range of theoretical and methodological approaches in agenda setting and gatekeeping roles. It is through such decentralization of governance, and spanning of boundaries, that established obligatory points of passage and agendas are potentially breached, thereby reducing the restrictiveness of KBs as they are transformed into more vibrant, outward-looking conversations.

3. *Critical exposure of KBs:* When scholars privately believe that a KB has little analytical and/or social potential, or when it is deemed socially/analytically regressive, we urge them to engage publicly with the KB rather than ignore it. Such engagement can raise awareness of a KB's shortcomings to its actual and potential pro-sumers, as well as to the gatekeepers of knowledge production (e.g. journal editors, referees, conference board members etc.). For such critical consciousness to become pervasive and durable, it is important that, as doctoral students and faculty, we fulfil our roles as (small 'p') political actors in the academic field, taking responsibility for questioning the field's entrenched power structures (see Prasad, 2013). This can help unsettle the depoliticised self-understandings that normalizes the adoption of KBs as comparatively low risk, formulaic vehicles for acquiring "top" journal hits, while disregarding responsibilities in the wider community.

4. *Opening research outlets to research outside the KBs:* Efforts to engage critically with KBs and to open their boundaries will be more effective if our prominent research outlets, including journals and conferences, go beyond making ceremonial

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gestures when inviting new/critical voices into the academic dialog. Journal editors, for example, could engage more reviewers from outside the KBs (including critical voices) to loosen up and redefine the intellectual terrain defined by KBs. They could also dedicate more space to deliberation and critical dialogue in the form of shorter, challenging pieces that actively elicit a response from the proponents of KBs who otherwise seem content to maintain a silence in response to their critics that can appear contemptuous of scholarly engagement and debate. In other words, we believe journal editors, as knowledge gatekeepers in our community, can play a key role in increasing the space for, and recognition of, diverse forms of research including those that are overtly "activist" in their ethico-political orientation, as contrasted to those in "active" pursuit of career through KB promotion and maintenance. Open access journals provide inspiring examples here. Journals such as Ephemera and M@n@gement, for example, not only publish much of the most innovative and challenging work in our field but demonstrate what can be accomplished even in the face of intensifying market-based pressures.

The focus of our essay has been on the adverse effects of KBs that we have identified as one significant element in a broader unravelling of scholarship, fuelled by excesses of managerialism and market-based policies. To resist this trend, the broader challenge is to reassess the value of measures and initiatives that have stimulated and normalized a shift away from intrinsic (e.g. curiosity-driven) motivation for knowledge generation and dissemination. This invites a wider, critical examination of the pathological consequences of adopting incentive structures that reward short-term performance improvement within league tables. It is equally important to study and give visibility to the cases where resistance to market pressures has been (even modestly) successful as templates/triggers for further action but also as sources for inspiration and hope.

We hope that our focus upon KBs is not perceived as a negative or vindictive effort to disparage their architects and exponents. Our purpose has been to interrogate the phenomenon, not its pro-sumers. The intent of our admittedly tentative and anecdotal sketch of Knowledge Branding has been to stimulate the development of a more inclusive and incisive frame of analysis for appreciating and debating, and potentially diminishing, the influence of market-oriented research activity, including Knowledge Branding, that is introverted and instrumental in orientation. More specifically, we have sought to air our concern that Knowledge Branding mobilises and strengthens divisive and individualizing forces that damage the ethico-political fabric of an already fragile research community. Reflecting upon and questioning our practices as management researchers is essential in the quest to re-enchant research by dispelling the intellectual *ennui* and displacing the conservatism that is corrupting the distinctive, critical core of our work. Protecting and nourishing this core is fundamental to the potential progressive contribution of our research to both understanding and practicing management.

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