

## **Constituting Best Practice in Management Consulting**

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## Constituting Best Practice in Management Consulting

### Abstract

This paper offers critical reflections on the construction and propagation of ‘best practice’: a concept which has become increasingly important in the business world and in civic life more generally. Focusing upon the activities of the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) we offer an analysis of the awards process instituted to applaud ‘best practice’ in the arena of consulting. Departing from existing academic representations of the advice industry which generally exclude this trade body from the analytical frame we consider the role which the MCA performs in the field of consulting. Situating the MCA’s attempt to constitute best practice within the work of Bruno Latour we argue that this construct depends upon the mobilization of an extended network of allies, advocates and spectators whose interactions have been written-out of academic analysis. The paper concludes by proposing the need for further research designed to explore, both, the heterogeneity and the porosity of the networks that construct, convey and applaud key knowledge products such as ‘best practice’.

Keywords: Best Practice, Management Consultants, Networks, Collectives, Latour

### Introduction

This paper offers an analysis of the construction and propagation of a form of management knowledge and a loosely related set of practices that is commonly reduced to the simple phrase: ‘management consultancy’. Alvesson and Johansson (2002) observe that, in contrast to many other realms of academic endeavour, no one is neutral when it comes time to reckon the merits of management consultancy. Indeed they argue that commentary on the topic of consulting tends to divide ‘pro-consultancy texts’ that ‘present a rather idealistic’, ‘normative’ and ‘self-promoting position’ from ‘critical texts’ that are, in contrast, ‘strongly negative towards consulting’ (229). Sturdy (2011) confirms the presence of this prevailing *Marmite* perspective<sup>1</sup>. And yet he observes that this partisan approach tends to cloud analysis and understanding. Consequently Sturdy argues there is a need to (re)situate debate on the nature, processes and merits of management consultancy within frameworks that

can probe – locally, historically and contextually – the workings of all those who act to shape not just social organization but the very ideals that construct and sustain organizing practices. Accepting the merit of Sturdy’s (2011) argument we offer an analysis of the construction of ‘best practice’ in the UK consulting industry. Focusing our attention on the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) and the annual ‘best practice’ awards which this body has instituted we will argue that the MCA has been written-out of academic analyses of the field of consultancy. In an attempt to remedy this situation we will trace the network that constitutes and conveys ‘best practice’ in consulting. Reflecting upon these networked interactions we will suggest the need for further research designed to explore – in context - the processes of mobilization and enrolment which act to shape our appreciation of the field of consulting.

Accordingly our analysis is structured as follows: We begin with brief reflections on the nature of the consulting industry and on the role which the MCA performs in this arena. This commentary, as we shall see, acts to frame a discussion of academic attempts to model the ways and means of consultancy. We then move on to consider four attempts to map the terrain of consulting. Reviewing these sketches we note key similarities. Indeed we observe that each – quite correctly – advances the understanding that the dynamics of consultancy are founded upon the need to advance and maintain legitimacy. Furthermore we acknowledge that each of these models acts usefully to situate consulting not as an industry but as a field (Suddaby and Greenwood 2001). Yet we argue that these accounts of the field of consulting reproduce an entrenched but distorting orthodoxy because they fail to pursue the practices that constitute and convey legitimacy in this domain. We conclude this

element of our paper, therefore, with the suggestion that there is a need for a more detailed exploration of the processes and interactions that construct, solidify and convey consulting practices. In pursuit of this situated, analytical, account of consulting we proceed to offer commentary on the Management Consultancies Association and an outline of Latour's (1999a; 1999b) reflections on 'world building'. Bruno Latour is generally associated with the study of science, scientists and technology (see Latour 1987; 1993; 1999a; 2005). It would be more accurate to suggest, however, that Latour has sought to explore the networks which experts forge as they attempt to inscribe the very nature of reality. Building upon a Latourian analysis of the networked processes that constitute and convey our understanding of the world, therefore, we will demonstrate that the MCA – as (in any sense of the term) a standard-bearer for the consulting industry - forges and relies upon an extensive and heterogeneously engineered collective that has not been recognised within academic accounts of the field of consulting. We then conclude with brief reflections on consulting, best practice and academic knowledge which it is hoped might usefully frame further research in this arena.

### **The Consulting Industry**

Academic interest in management advice has mushroomed in recent years (see McKenna 2006). Narratives in this arena typically commence with an attempt to demonstrate that expenditure on advisory services has risen dramatically over the past three decades (see for example McKenna 2006; Canato and Giangreco 2011; Kipping and Clark 2012). Such prefacing assertions, however, tend to obscure key debates that persist as to the nature of consulting and the size of the industry. Collins (2006), for example, suggests that academic accounts of the consulting industry misunderstand

the nature and scope of managerial advice, and so, seriously under-estimate the extent of the networks that act to constitute and to convey managerial knowledge. Gross and Poor (2008), in contrast, argue that academia operates with an inflated model of consulting because it too readily accepts the industry's own estimations of its economic worth and political clout. Picking up on aspects of this debate Kipping and Clark (2012, 4) highlight the insecurity of academic knowledge claims in this arena. They note, for example, that contemporary estimations of the global market for management consultancy range between \$150 billion and \$350 billion per annum. Comparing this expenditure with the burgeoning market in academic commentary Kipping and Clark (2012) suggest that academic interest in the forms and processes of management consultancy may now be disproportionate to the significance of this activity. There may be some truth in this – even if the authors' comments do seem to suggest some absence of self-awareness<sup>ii</sup> - but this normative criticism largely misses the point! The key question, surely, is *not* whether the field of management consultancy is of a sufficient size to maintain and to justify the attention of an academic community rather the issue is – or should be – whether the academic community has, in fact, developed an adequate understanding of the ways and means by which knowledge is constructed and propagated in this domain. In his overview of the field Sturdy (2011) suggests that academic texts on consulting fail this test. Indeed he argues that scholarly (and more laudatory) accounts of management consulting misunderstand and/ or misrepresent the field because they fail to locate the practices that construct and convey management knowledge. Recognising this limitation we will review the activities of the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) as we consider the annual 'best practice' awards instituted by this organization in 1996. Recognising on-going developments, which in mirroring changes in the field of

consulting have acted to extend the categories of work within which ‘best practice’ is celebrated, we focus our attention on the mid-point of an emerging set of practices, and so, offer detailed reflections on the constitution of the 2005 awards. Yet before we consider the networked processes that act, both, to frame and to legitimate the 2005 awards we must pause to offer a brief introduction to the MCA as well as more general reflections on the manner in which the field of consulting has been constructed in and through academic commentary.

### *The Management Consultancies Association*

The Management Consultancies Association (MCA) is a trade body. This fact combined with the impression that the organization exists to advance the interests of an industry that is, at best, ‘ante-professional’ (McKenna 2008) but more probably ‘anti-professional’ (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002) in its commercial dealings means that academia has tended to discount the workings of the MCA and has, as a consequence, largely written this trade body out of its reflections on the advice industry. This position, as we shall see, does little to improve understanding of the ways and means of the field of consulting.

The MCA was formed in 1956 (as the Management Consultancy Association) with just four founding members who, at that time, it is estimated accounted for 75% of the UK consulting industry. The association, which is located on Cornhill in the City of London, has grown rapidly in recent years. At the start of 2012 the MCA had 60 member organizations. By 2014 however this had reduced to just 54 members. Taken together these 54 organizations are reckoned to account for 60% of the UK consulting industry. The MCA exists, primarily, to enhance the reputation of the consultancy

industry. To this end it sets qualifying criteria for membership. To qualify for membership of the MCA, businesses must offer an approved portfolio of independent consulting services. In addition member organizations must have traded continuously for a minimum period; must not exceed certain threshold values of staff turnover and must, furthermore, agree to abide by a code of professional standards established by the MCA.

The Management Consultancies Association calculates that, between the early 1980s and the millennium, growth rates in the UK consultancy industry exceeded 20% per annum (MCA 2000; 2001). In the period 2001-2003 this trend was temporarily reversed (MCA 2005; 2006; House of Lords Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2007), however, the trade body reports that the industry quickly returned to growth until it was – in common with so many others – rocked by the global economic downturn of 2008. In 2009 the UK economy returned to growth and the consulting industry expanded along with it. Unlike the economy, however, the UK consulting industry sustained this recovery and has, since 2009 continued to grow, albeit at a slower pace than before (MCA 2011).

Commenting upon this growth rate the MCA (2011) reports that in 2011 the 40 000 consultants said to be active in the UK generated revenues of £8.1 billion.

Furthermore they report that in 2012 earnings rose by a further £900 000 to £9 billion.

Debate as to the essential nature of consulting services and a tendency to collapse managerial advice into a narrow range of service offerings (Collins 2006), however, makes it rather difficult to trust these figures. Indeed discontinuities in the data set developed by the MCA reduce our ability to track change over time. For example the

figures produced for 2006 (MCA 2007) exclude – without explanation or elaboration – 22, 000 individuals who had previously been counted as ‘consultants’ (see MCA 2006). Furthermore inconsistencies in the data sets produced by the MCA and by its European counterpart the Fédération Européene des Associations de Conseils en Organisations (FEACO) act to limit the amount of faith that we can place in the MCA’s calculations of its size and performance in any given year. Yet we can still take something from these figures *if* we are prepared to accept that the statistical inconsistencies in the MCA’s calculations *and* the potential for inflationary self-representation (Gross and Poor 2008) are, at root, reflections of the structural characteristics of the business of consulting which dictate that legitimacy, representation and impression-management must be central concerns for those who produce and for those who trade in management knowledge (see Sturdy 1997; 2002; 2011; Czarniawska and Mazza 2003; Alvesson and Johansson 2002; Armbrüster 2004).

### *Legitimacy in Consulting*

A number of academic commentaries have considered the essential nature of consulting and in so doing have raised questions pertaining to representation and legitimacy in this arena. Here we will consider four attempts to map the terrain of consulting. As we shall see these maps are remarkably similar insofar as they reject orthodox ‘industry-level’ analyses preferring instead to analyse the organizational field. Commenting upon this analytical distinction Suddaby and Green (2001) note that the organizational field is ‘both broader and more interactive than traditional notions such as industry or market sector’ (934), and so, includes communities and agencies not generally recognised in industry-level studies. The accounts under



review extend over more than a decade and encompass the period from 2001 to 2012 (Suddaby and Greenwood 2001; Kipping and Engwall 2003; Clark 2004a; Jung and Kieser 2012). We will not however discuss these models in chronological order. Instead – to aid exposition – we begin with the work of Kipping and Engwall (2003) before proceeding to consider the contributions of Jung and Kieser (2012), Clark (2004a) and finally Suddaby and Greenwood (2001). This format is, we believe, productive because it allows us to begin with an examination of the manner in which the nature of the consulting product acts to shape conduct in this arena. In addition this ordering, insofar as it moves us (non-chronologically) from simple to more complex renderings, suggests that academic understanding of this arena has moved retrogressively between 2001 and 2012, demonstrates that the domain of consulting can be sketched in different ways, and so, makes space for our contention that the field should now be re-drawn to explore more fully the processes of enrolment and mobilization that constitute our appreciation of, both, consulting and best practice.

Commenting upon the interactions which construct and convey management knowledge Kipping and Engwall (2003) begin by observing that the consulting product is peculiar. Indeed they argue that the peculiarity of the consultancy product 'determines the activities of the consulting industry to a considerable extent' (4). The main consulting product – management knowledge – is, they observe, impossible to evaluate, objectively, before, during or after the consulting intervention. Consequently conduct – both personal and organizational - in this arena reflects an abiding preoccupation with reputation and legitimation such that management consultancy firms are obliged to forge direct links or more general associations with others, who have a capacity to transport or to sanction their products. Thus Kipping and Engwall

propose that the ‘advice industry’ might, usefully, be thought of as a network, or field, that brings key actors together in a complex set of, sometimes symbiotic, sometimes competitive, relationships. Sketching this collective the authors suggest that an on-going, need for affirmation has caused consultancy firms to forge associations with academic institutions; with media companies and with the realm of managerial practice more generally (see figure one).

[FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE]

#### *Academic Links*

In the eyes of the public, at large, academic institutions tend to enjoy high levels of status and prestige. Commenting upon the decline of trust in British society, Sampson (2004) observes that academic scholars occupy a privileged position in democratic societies such as the UK. Academics are, he tells us, quite unlike politicians and (tabloid) journalists insofar as they are, broadly, trusted to speak truthfully and objectively. When discussions become ill-tempered or when policies excite controversy, therefore, academic commentators tend to be called upon to offer an objective view on the available evidence. It is this status – as neutral arbiters of quality and reliability – Kipping and Engwall tell us, which has encouraged consultancy firms to forge relationships with academia.

#### *Media Links*

Relations between consulting firms and media companies have transformed in recent years. Until recently top consulting firms tended to be suspicious of the media. Indeed a code of professional ethics established by Marvin Bower (see Edersheim 2004), in combination with a desire to safeguard proprietary knowledge (see Crainer 1997;

Brindle and Stearns 2001) tended to make consulting organizations reticent about publicising their activities. However it has been suggested (see Collins 2007) that the positive publicity, which McKinsey achieved in the wake of the publication of *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman 1982) altered the industry's perception of the media to such an extent that consulting organizations are now keen to publicise their successes either through in-house journals or through wider media outlets. For example *The McKinsey Quarterly* – the house journal of the McKinsey consulting organization now has a Twitter presence. This may be found at #McKQuarterly.

### *Links to Practice*

Discussing the final element of their representation of the advice industry, Kipping and Engwall suggest that the link between consulting firms and the wider arena of business practice is the most important node of the consulting collective. Explaining their reasoning the authors argue that it is the 'contribution to practice' which defines the success of the consultant and differentiates the applied knowledge of the consulting firm from the more abstract or esoteric forms valued within the academy (see Abbott 1988).

[FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE]

Jung and Kieser (2012) also suggest that the business of consulting is configured around the need to establish legitimacy. Yet they depict the arena that makes management knowledge in a slightly different manner (see figure two). This alternative depiction of the management fashion arena is notable insofar as it adds new 'users' and new 'sanctioning agents' – such as 'shareholders' and 'analysts' – to

the field. Furthermore the framework prepared by Jung and Kieser usefully highlights the complex nature of the interactions that shape management knowledge inasmuch as it suggests that actors may switch roles. Drawing attention to the roles played by ‘users’ of management and the activities of ‘sanctioning agents’ such as ‘business analysts’, therefore, Jung and Kieser suggest that the boundaries between these communities overlap. Thus they observe that business analysts might choose to assess the fitness of a business strategy and/ or a putative Chief Executive in relation to fashionable ideas. Yet the authors point out that in this context the ‘business analyst’ occupies a privileged position such that his/her use of a fashionable concept or tool may be enough to establish the utility of this development for other – less prominent – users.

In his analysis of *Strategy viewed from a management fashion perspective*, Clark (2004a) offers an account of the construction of management knowledge that is – analytically and pictorially - similar to that outlined by Jung and Kieser (2012). Yet unlike the representation of the advice industry rendered by these authors, Clark’s account of consulting industry dynamics is framed within a more general critique of the literature concerned with the production and prosecution of business strategy. He argues that scholars of strategic management have tended to operate with an Olympian model of management (Whittington 1993). Indeed he suggests that the labour of strategy has been presented as the effective domain of a cadre of managers, which works *within* the host organization albeit with the benefit of a cosmopolitan outlook. Clark, of course, concedes the importance of the work carried out by this elite but counters that there is a need to acknowledge the inspiration, support and guidance that these actors receive from outside agents and agencies. Thus Clark

(2004a) suggests that scholarship on strategic management has a paradoxical quality inasmuch as it suggests that managers must craft strategies that reflect the wider environment of business and yet it simultaneously denies these actors access to the tools, templates and resources, vital to the labour of strategy, which are abundantly available in the extra-organizational arena. To overcome this, unnecessarily, introspective account of the processes of strategy formulation and development, Clark (2004a) suggests that we should accord a role to the agents of advice and fashion. Identifying the key members of this management fashion-setting community he offers a graphic portrayal of the field that, in common with those reviewed above, highlights the manner in which those who would advance consulting endeavours are obliged to forge relationships that might enhance the legitimacy of their offerings. Thus Clark notes linkages between management consulting; academia; the media and the wider arena of business practice (see figure three). Moving beyond the analysis of Kipping and Engwall (2003), however, Clark's (2004a) analysis also explicitly acknowledges the influence which editors and publishers have on the shape and tone of management texts (see also Clark and Greatbatch 2003; Clark, 2004b).

[FIGURE THREE ABOUT HERE]

Suddaby's and Greenwood's (2001) rendering of the field of consulting is in comparison to the models reviewed above larger, more dynamic and more, explicitly, political in character. On the size of the arena, for example, the authors draw our attention to the enlargement of the field of consulting as they document the entry of the (then) Big Five accounting firms in to the mainstream consulting business. The entry of this Big Five into mainstream management consulting also introduces a new

dynamic insofar as it suggests that conduct in the field of consulting may be shaped, increasingly, not by simple market competition, but by disputes over professional jurisdiction (Abbott 1988). Unlike their contemporaries, however, Suddaby and Greenwood choose to place the consumer at the centre of the processes that make and transmit management knowledge. Yet this positioning is slightly misleading because the authors are keen to point out that it is the management guru who remains the prime-mover in the cyclical process of management knowledge production/ consumption. Anticipating concerns recently raised by Clark et al (2012; see also Bhatanachoen et al. 2012), Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) suggest that Huczynski's (1993) attempt to divide management's gurus into three discrete camps - 'hero managers'; 'consultant gurus'; and 'academic gurus' - tends to obscure the complexity of the gurus' biographies. Nonetheless Suddaby and Greenwood insist that management's gurus – speaking now in a variety of registers – provide the management knowledge cycle with its initial impetus *and* with the strategic interventions necessary to counter the forces of entropy in this system. Examining the processes that energise this management knowledge cycle, Suddaby and Greenwood are keen to point out that while management fashions have colonized organizations these fashionable notions are, nonetheless, translated as they are consumed by organizational actors. Reflecting upon the broader political ramifications of the growth and development of the field of consulting, Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) actually cast doubts on the later models produced by their contemporaries. Where Kipping and Engwall (2003) and Jung and Kieser (2012), for example, affirm a role for academia within the field of consulting, Suddaby and Greenwood complain that, between them, the gurus and consultants have sidelined the academy. Furthermore the

authors warn that future academic attempts to secure a voice in the business of management carry the very real danger of outright co-optation in this context.

[FIGURE FOUR ABOUT HERE]

Taken together these four sketches of the advice industry usefully locate consulting – not as an industry – but as a ‘field’. They also capture the broad dynamics of this domain insofar as they recognise that the field of consulting is shaped by the on-going need to establish and maintain the legitimacy of knowledge and practice. And yet these models remain limiting. They continue, for example, to abbreviate relationships in this field because they misunderstand the nature and scope of managerial advice (Collins, 2006). In addition they actively obscure the role played by actors such as the MCA. In an attempt to extend and improve our understanding of the field of consulting, therefore, we will trace the network that constitutes ‘best practice’ for the MCA and – in an attempt to situate these interactions - we will place this networking in the context of Latour’s account of world-building.

### *The MCA and Best Practice*

To further the general aims and standing of the association and its members, the MCA established, in 1996, an annual award for ‘Best Practice’. This is, it avers<sup>iii</sup>, ‘the benchmark for quality within the consulting industry’, adding that best practice awards ‘are the ideal way to demonstrate and recognise the value of consulting. They also celebrate how clients and consultants working together achieve the best results’. The nature of best practice propagated by the MCA is, perhaps, most usefully described as a ‘container’ (see McDermott 1993; Østerlund and Carlile 2005) insofar

as it assumes that knowledge – when appropriately codified and organized – may be moved within and between settings. Furthermore this containerised account assumes that ‘best practice’ may be supplied to passive recipients who will, irrespective of their situation, apply *it* in a manner that will enhance their practical endeavours. The MCA’s conceptualisation of ‘best practice’ is closely tied to notions of ‘partnership’ and economic value-added and has remained broadly stable since 1996. However the locales wherein best practice is promoted and celebrated have been adapted to reflect, both, changing market conditions and client preferences. In 2004, for example, the MCA awarded prizes for best practice in eight areas of consulting practice including Information Technology and Customer Relationship Marketing. In addition the MCA also awarded a prize to the consulting organization judged to be the ‘Best Overall Winner’. In the following year, 2005, the MCA again awarded prizes for ‘best practice’ in eight, key, areas. However it modified these categories to include Change Management and Electronic Trading which had been excluded from the 2004 event. Despite restricting the awards to just eight categories the MCA actually extended its list of prize-winners in 2005 by making ‘gold’, ‘silver’ and ‘bronze’ awards to companies that demonstrated ‘best practice’ in each of the defined areas. It also added a ‘platinum’ award, which was presented to the best overall entry. Recognising the modest scale of many consulting businesses (see Sturdy 2011) the MCA also made a special award to the best small consultancy, which it defined (in rather broad terms) as employing fewer than 50 consultants. In 2011 the MCA, again, extended the terrain of its prize-giving. In this year it awarded trophies to consulting firms for the achievement of ‘best practice’ in 12 key areas including Innovation, Technology and Risk Management. In addition the trade body made separate awards to individual consultants for exceptional endeavours in six of the 12 general areas selected.



To enter the awards process, consulting firms must follow certain instructions. For the 2005 prize-giving event, for example, each firm was obliged to submit - with the agreement of their client - a 2000 word case study that detailed the essence of their claim to best practice. Through this case report the competition entrants were expected to demonstrate the existence of a functioning partnership between consultant and client. Working in tandem, therefore, the partners were obliged to detail the problem faced; the solution developed and the benefits – both quantifiable and less tangible - of the consulting engagement. Since the competition is designed to celebrate success in management consultancy rather than competence in creative writing, the MCA advised entrants that they could choose to enlist the services of a professional (ghost) writer as they prepared their submissions. To assist in this authoring process, the MCA produced a detailed *pro forma*, which indicated, clearly, the structure and minimum content expected of the cases studies. For the 2005 awards, therefore, entrants were obliged to construct their submissions around key headings. These headings, in effect, codify and define the parameters of ‘best practice’ (see figure five).

[FIGURE FIVE ABOUT HERE]

The case studies submitted to the MCA were passed to the ‘Durham Consulting Group’ (DCG) for screening. The MCA describes the Durham Consulting Group – perhaps a little grandly - as a network of practitioners, clients, scholars and policy-makers based in and around the University of Durham. It might, however, be more accurate to suggest that the DCG is, in fact, a collection of MBA students enrolled at

the University of Durham who for this task worked under the direction of Professor Timothy Clark. Before it embarked on its screening of the case studies the DCG members (including Professor Clark) were obliged to sign up to a code of ethics created by the MCA. Working within this code of conduct the Durham Consulting Group was invited to evaluate the submissions against five criteria:

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

Having compiled a shortlist for further evaluation, the DCG passed the, now reduced, cohort of competition entries to the main judging panel. This judging panel called upon the services of representatives of the *Financial Times*, the Audit Commission, the polling organization MORI, Sainsbury's, the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) which is now a division of HM Treasury, the banking industry and 'a leading member of the Durham Consulting Group' to name but a few of those called to adjudicate. Those submissions judged to have secured economic value-added through the activities of partnership or, more plainly, to have met the requirements of 'best practice' were awarded prizes and had their endeavours published by *Management Today*. To assist in the production of materials suitable for general publication, the winning organizations (whether or not they had previously employed 'ghost writers') were partnered, either, with staff writers from *Management Today* or with free-lance authors working on behalf of this journal.

In an attempt to situate and account for the networked interactions that have served to constitute best practice for the MCA we now turn to consider Latour's account of the

knots and links which construct our understanding of the world and our place within this fabrication.

### **World Building**

Taken as a whole the work of Latour (see for example 1987; 1993; 1999a; 2005) offers a challenge to those who assume that scientific experts (including those of the social scientific persuasion) simply report on the reality of a world that is external to the observer. He argues that far from reporting on a reality - out there - scientists are involved in projects, which seek to construct, promote and defend representations, which nonetheless make claims to objectivity. Latour (1999b), therefore, suggests that researchers and experts more generally are involved in 'world building' projects in that they seek to inscribe the very nature of reality for others. This 'world building' account of the production and stabilisation of knowledge turns upon the capabilities of networks or collectives. Recognising the significance of such collectives, Latour observes that the lone researcher – so often vaunted in histories of science and in the public imagination - is a contradiction in terms because experts rely on networks to establish their authority as spokespersons. In an attempt to demonstrate the links and alliances that authorise experts to articulate for and on behalf of others, Latour (1999a) offers a graphical depiction of the inter-locking loops or orbits of activity (see figure six) which are fundamental to 'world building'. This graphical representation of the work undertaken by collectives suggests that the processes, which inscribe our worlds and shape our realities, depend upon the mediation of five related elements.

[FIGURE SIX ABOUT HERE]

The five inter-locking loops, which link and structure the alliances that make our worlds, Latour names as follows:

Mobilization

Autonomization

Alliances

Public representation

Links and Knots

### *Mobilization*

Latour (1987) argues that researchers are generally represented in (social) scientific textbooks as travellers; as ‘pilgrims’ who voyage forth in search of objective knowledge and enlightenment. Yet his analysis of world building endeavours suggests that it would be more appropriate to portray (social) scientists as ‘settlers’ insofar as these experts are obliged to engage in a range of practices designed to tame the world. The practices involved in the domestication of the world, Latour terms mobilization. Commenting upon these mobilizing processes, Latour (1987) argues that – if they are to act scientifically - researchers must toil to bring the outside world into their laboratories (and offices) and, what is more, must make strenuous efforts to ensure that this, now domesticated, form of the world revolves around their concerns. Thus he argues that the practice of world building requires the researcher to engage in a range of technically demanding labours designed to render a natural (or a native) world that is suitable for the ordeals of objective inquiry. Reflecting upon these labours, Latour (1999b) observes that different disciplines tend to employ contrasting strategies in their approaches to mobilization. In the ‘hard’ sciences for example, he suggests that the expert maintains a centre-stage position and keeps the object of

his/her inquiries in motion around a central orbit by, for example, embarking on ‘expeditions’ designed to collect, order, label and return specimens from the field. In the ‘softer’ sciences, Latour argues that the field is mobilized through the use of tools such as surveys, *pro formas* and questionnaires which, in various ways, seek to categorize human conduct. In keeping with this appreciation of the many labours involved in rendering, either the natural or the native world amenable to scientific practice, Latour argues that experts must construct, name and mobilize the domains which they appear, merely, to observe. Thus Latour suggests that what we conventionally regard as data is more properly thought of as *sub lata*; as an ‘achievement’.

#### *Autonomization*

Latour, as we have seen, observes that researchers have no authority when they stand alone. Echoing Kuhn (1970), he argues that world builders – if they are to address and ultimately resolve controversies – must work with colleagues to agree terms of reference and to set standards of measurement and conduct. Given the researcher’s 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 the ‘normal’ scientific processes (Kuhn, 1970), which inscribe our realities. Indeed he warns that in the absence of a college of collaborators there will be no agreed criteria of relevance and no common standards available for the evaluation of world building labours. In short: no legitimate field of inquiry.

### *Alliances*

Latour's first two loops of inscription deal with separation – the first with the separation of the messy, external world from the orderly world of the researcher, and the second with the development of an academy separate from, and superior to, the world of the lay-observer (see Latour 1987). Somewhat paradoxically, however, Latour's third loop deals with a process that seeks to reopen and to enlarge the collective, hitherto, concerned with separation and enclosure.

Discussing a range of scientific developments - the mapping of DNA (Latour, 1987); Boyle's identification of the emptiness of vacuums (Latour 1993); and Pasteur's thermal conquest of microbes (Latour 1999a) – Latour argues that these developments turn upon the production and enrolment of large social-technical collectives. The operation of these collectives leads Latour to question the analytical divide which separates 'humans-among-themselves' from objects or 'things-in-themselves'. Controversially, therefore, Latour accords some degree of agency to non-human 'actants'. Furthermore he argues that these now re-imagined collectives extend the (social) scientist's labours well beyond the confines of the laboratory. For Latour, therefore, a world building endeavour becomes authoritative when the networks which construct its representations and inscriptions are extensive and heterogeneous in their engineering.

### *Public Representation*

Students of the social construction of science tend to suggest that the labours of researchers and the machinations of their academies need to be discussed in relation to a social world (Latour 1987). This social realm is generally acknowledged as

having a capability to shape and/ or temper the conduct of inquiry. Nevertheless, the social sphere is, typically, regarded as being separate from laboratory life. Latour however, does not accept this separation of the social and scientific realms. The ‘outside’ or ‘social world’ is, he argues, a representation not a physical location. Furthermore he protests that this representation of ‘the outside world’ remains very much a product of the expert’s machinations. Pursuing the implications of this de-separated account of ‘the social’ and ‘the scientific’, Latour argues that the sundering practices of mobilization and autonomization are, in truth, self-limiting and, potentially, self-defeating because world builders depend upon the on-going faith and goodwill of a larger public that must be cast from *and yet drawn back into* their endeavours. The activities of the charity, Cancer Research UK, offer a useful illustration of the ways in which world building endeavours are, both, structured by and dependent upon the continuing goodwill and enrolment of the laity.

Each year Cancer Research UK – as the single, biggest, independent funder of cancer research in Europe – provides around £300 million to scientists involved in oncological inquiry (Leahy 2012). This funding stream plays a very important role in the struggle against cancer. Indeed it is clear that the science of cancer research would be a different and more limited set of practices in the absence of these monies. Yet continuation of this funding depends upon the willingness of Britain’s mothers, spouses, sisters and daughters to participate in the ‘Race for Life’ and upon the ability of these women to persuade friends, family and work-mates to sponsor participation in this event. From a Latourian perspective the interactions that constitute the ‘Race for Life’ serve to demonstrate the extent to which the scientific practices of cancer research remain dependent upon the enrolment and mobilization of an extended

collective that is excluded from and yet very much a part of the scientific world.

These brief reflections on the broader network that constitutes cancer research imply that the domain of the world builder is rather more porous and much more gregarious than we might have anticipated. It is this recognition of porosity and interconnectedness that shapes Latour's reflections on the 'links and knots' of (social) scientific endeavour.

### *Links and knots*

Latour's 'links and knots' provide both the nucleus of the processes which inscribe our realities and a more general overview of the machinations of world building. Thus the central component of Latour's diagram 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 1999a, 108). Noting the importance of this, potentially obstinate and disorderly world, Latour (1999a) argues that concepts become scientific; collectives become colleges; and inquisitive minds become authoritative voices only when they are able to 'churn, steer, move and connect' (108) the disparate elements of our lives into a co-ordinated network. Latour, therefore, suggests that while studies of (social) scientific practice tend to focus upon scholarly inquiry as a lonely pursuit, the work of the world builder and his/ her claims to authority actually turn upon the reckoning of a much larger and more diverse collective.

In the section that follows we will use Latour's insights concerning world building; the importance of collectives; and the centrality of 'colleges' to (re)examine the Management Consultancies Association (MCA) and its annual awards for best



practice. We will, therefore, revisit Latour's account of the links and knots that bring data, colleagues, allies and spectators together as we attempt to reveal, more fully, the heads and hands involved in the extended division of labour which, simultaneously constitutes and applauds best practice in the field of management consultancy.

### **The wider arena of consulting**

In our analysis of 'world building' we observed that Latour (1999a) suggests that experts 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 this section we will review the processes involved in the construction of best practice in consulting from a Latourian perspective. Consequently we will examine the processes of mobilization, autonomization, alliance-building and public representation, which come together in the world building endeavours of the MCA.

#### *Mobilization*

In seeking to constitute 'best practice' as a set of collaborative processes that support the generation of value-adding business outcomes, the MCA has mobilized an extended collective that includes its own member firms, non-member consulting organizations and their clients. It has, we should note, mobilized these complex organizations in a project where each, in pursuit of prestige, reputational benefits and future business opportunities, has chosen to submit to a process of examination. In agreeing to this examination each consultant-client combination has had to indulge a number of *conceits*. Crucially those submitting themselves for inspection and evaluation have been obliged to accept that the complexities of their worlds and

experiences can be rendered, synoptically, in 2000 words under four headings and against five criteria of relevance. These ‘entry requirements’ suggest that the Management Consultancies Association, in common with all those who enjoy success in their attempts to inscribe public understanding, has made the world of consulting travel to it in a reduced, catalogued and, perhaps most importantly, a cost-effective format. Furthermore it has, as we shall see, successfully persuaded this re-engineered world to orbit the key mission objectives of the MCA.

### *Autonomization*

The accounts of the advice industry reviewed earlier suggest that consulting organizations have forged linkages with academics in an attempt to legitimate their knowledge claims. Our reflections on the constitution of ‘best practice’ in consulting, however, suggest that the MCA has sought to legitimate its broader aims and approach by a different route. Rather than forging relationships with academia, the MCA has, in the guise of the Durham Consulting Group, developed what amounts to an in-house ‘college of consulting’. This college of consulting performs a pivotal role in the construction of best practice insofar as its actions (shaped of course by a *pro forma*) generate the short-list that the judging panel uses to select the winners.

The Durham Consulting Group does, of course, exhibit some of the characteristics of the academic node which features, for example, in Kipping’s and Engwall’s (2003) rendering of the advice industry. Thus the DCG is, notionally, constituted within an academic setting and, plainly, performs the role of a sanctioning agent insofar as it has been drawn into the MCA’s network to provide the affirmation that flows from more familiar forms and modes of academic engagement. Yet the DCG is not the academy:

Its conduct and its ethics, for example, are shaped by a code of practice defined – not by a Royal College – but by the MCA! In addition the DCG exhibits none of the characteristics which Sampson (2004) and others (see Kuhrana 2007; Collini 2012) suggest are, or should be, typical of academia. We should note, therefore, that the DCG shows no broader commitment to critique; no enduring commitment to objectivity; no abiding attachment to academic freedom. Indeed this collective is – to all intents and purposes – a creature of the MCA inasmuch as its voice in the awards process is limited to the five areas of interest defined by the trade body. Furthermore its position within the collective is conditional upon adherence to a code of ethical practice laid down by the Management Consultancies Association. Thus our reflections on the constitution of best practice in consulting suggest that the MCA has, in effect, dispensed with the academic node that features so prominently in existing accounts of the consulting field and has, instead, replaced this with a proxy: a (wholly-owned) college of consultancy instituted not to define a legitimate field of inquiry or to police standards of conduct but to project and to affirm the existence of ‘partnership’ and ‘economic value-added’ in and through ‘best practice’.

### *Alliances*

To make its best practice awards in any sense worthy the MCA has worked hard to produce a closed world of criteria, standards and methodologies. Yet to secure this internal world as a viable project the MCA has had to open its doors to others who can provide a broader legitimation for its aims and concerns. The MCA has, therefore, sought to forge alliances with collectives that operate beyond the limits of the normal academic frame. It has, for example, developed an adjudication panel to review the shortlist compiled by its college of consulting. Through this adjudication

panel the Management Consultancies Association has reached out from its seat on Cornhill to build links with the Office of Government Commerce, the Audit Commission; the Cabinet Office; the ‘quality’ press; and the banking industry to list only a few of those who have been called to testify as to the nature and desirability of ‘best practice’.

### *Public representation*

Latour reminds us that collectives of the great and good require public endorsement if they are to keep their domesticated worlds in orbit around them. Indeed our reflections on Cancer Research UK and its Race for Life suggest that future research into this disease, literally, requires that the public-at-large should be kept in motion!

In keeping with its broader aims the MCA has taken steps to ensure that the works of its college, together with the deliberations of its judging panel, reach the general public in a format that is lucidly rendered and hence easily consumed. In 2004, for example, the winning organizations were each assigned, either, a staff writer or a free-lance author in the employ of the *Guardian*. For the 2005 awards the MCA, again, took steps to secure an appropriate public representation of its aims, concerns and outlook by forming an alliance with *Management Today*. In line with Latour’s (1987) account of world building it is interesting to observe that the literature on best practice, prepared for the public-at-large is careful to allow access only to certain areas of the collective. Crucially the reports produced by *Management Today* do not linger on the constructed nature of best practice nor do they detail the processes whereby claims to this benchmark are weighed and measured because this might open ‘negative salients’ (Latour, 1987) in the front advanced by the MCA. Instead

the material made available to the general public simply announces the winners of the awards and celebrates their joint endeavours. In this way the MCA invites readers into a world where best practice is natural, stable and uncontroversial; a public good; a beacon and a boon to all.

### *Links and knots*

In preparing their outlines of the field of consulting Kipping and Engwall (2003), Jung and Kieser (2012), Clark (2004a) and Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) have, in different ways, drawn attention to the activities of consultants, gurus, academics, publishers, editors, conference organizers and, of course, practicing managers. Our analysis of these texts, however, highlights the omission of the MCA and suggests, furthermore, that this association has been actively excluded from academic analysis despite its preoccupation with the very tools and strategies of legitimation that are said to define the business of consulting. Recognising that this exclusion is unwarranted our analysis of the Management Consultancies Association and its best practice awards has sought to demonstrate that the arena which carries and propagates management knowledge is, at once, much larger and more heterogeneous in its engineering than academic sketches currently acknowledge. Indeed our Latourian (re)situation of the machinations which constitute best practice suggests that the MCA's awards process depends upon the good offices of a college of consulting and upon the continuing articulation (Latour 1999a) of a collective (see figure seven), which links Durham with the City of London; government with commerce; and the wheels of industry with the wheeling and dealing of the entertainment business 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 approval.

[FIGURE SEVEN ABOUT HERE]

### **Concluding Comments**

This paper has offered critical reflections on the networked interactions that constitute management knowledge. Reviewing academic attempts to model the advice/ fashion arena we have observed that our understanding of this arena is a) relatively stable, b) founded upon an abiding concern with legitimacy and c) rooted analytically with an account of the organizational field. Indeed we have observed that analyses located at the level of the organizational field now represent the orthodox academic position on that form of management knowledge and practice that has been reduced to the simple term: management consulting. Yet we have argued that these familiar if somewhat retrogressive renderings of the field of consulting continue to distort our appreciation of the networked processes that constitute knowledge in this arena. In pursuit of a fuller and more properly situated appreciation of the field of consulting, therefore, we have offered an account of the MCA and its annual 'best practice' awards. Focusing upon the 2005 awards – the mid-point in a developing field of practice – we have sought to realise an enlarged organizational field. This alternative realisation of the field, combined with its (re)location within the work of Latour, has enabled us to produce a distinctive appreciation of the networked processes which act to solidify and to transmit management knowledge. Thus our preferred account of the constitution and propagation of consulting best practice challenges the models of management consultancy developed by Kipping and Engwall (2003); by Clark (2004a) and by Jung and Kieser (2012) insofar as it

suggests that the field is, at once, larger, more porous and more heterogeneously engineered than previously acknowledged. Our research also extends and refines the contribution of Suddaby and Greenwood (2001). These authors, as we have seen, suggest that academia has been sidelined by management consultants in public debate such that academics now – perhaps in search of ‘enterprise engagement’ or ‘impact’ (see Collini 2012) – risk outright co-optation. Our analysis demonstrates that the concerns raised by Suddaby and Green are both pertinent and real. Yet our reflections qualify and augment the analytical framework developed by these authors insofar as we highlight the presence of a novel institutional mechanism – a college of consulting - that has been established, we suggest, to place a veneer of academic objectivity upon the MCA’s awards process. We recognise, of course, that more detailed research on the processes that constitute, convey and applaud consulting practices will be required if we are to embrace fully Sturdy’s (2011) attempt to reconfigure the field. In addition we acknowledge that Latour’s sociology is controversial (see for example Law and Hassard 1999). Indeed we concede that our attempt to apply the work of Latour has said little about the ways in which non-human actants might contribute to the world-building activities of the MCA. Nonetheless it is hoped that this paper might be regarded as a useful overture to a programme of research designed to locate and to tease out the many knots and links which ‘churn, steer, move and connect’ (Latour 1999a: 108) us with the field of consulting and with constructs such as ‘best practice’.

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<sup>i</sup> *Marmite* is the brand name of a savoury spread made from brewer's yeast. The spread is low in fat, rich in vitamins and contains folic acid. Yet despite these qualities the product continues to excite and polarise opinion: Many find it to be both nutritious and delicious while a similar number plainly regard its taste and pungent aroma as disgusting. Recognising that no one appears to be neutral when the topic of conversation is *Marmite* the product has been marketed under the strap-line: 'love it or hate it'. In everyday speech therefore products, ideas or practices which excite and yet polarise opinion are said to have a *Marmite* quality.

<sup>ii</sup> The Oxford Handbook of Management Consultancy, edited by Kipping and Clark was published in 2012 and runs to 592 pages.

<sup>iii</sup> see [www.mca.org.uk/awards](http://www.mca.org.uk/awards) accessed 08/05/2012