

# 19 DISCOURSE, MANAGEMENT FASHIONS, AND ERP SYSTEMS

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## Abstract

*This paper critiques the notion of discourse as the sole means to apprehend the world. It uses the idea of management fashion as an example of a discourse based approach to explore the rise and apparent demise of ERP systems. The outcome of this investigation is to propose that the idea of articulation is a more useful way to explain the mechanisms by which relations are constructed, sustained, and fall away in the organizing of technologies such as ERP systems.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where discourse is evident: we talk about globalization, e-business, competition, threats, recession, strategy, and so on and on. In a sense, such talk is constructive: it articulates and redefines the objects that are talked about. As Chia (2000) has recently noted, the social world is an abstraction; created from a flux of sense impressions that meet us constantly. From this mass of sensory data, we label, classify, and construct the entities that surround us. Of course, this activity is strongly conditioned by past experiences and the milieu in which we live. As is so often quoted, Eskimos appear to have 40 words for different types of snow indicating that the classification of our perceptions relate to the activities in which we engage in (Potter 1996, p. 100).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is often argued to be a myth (see Pullum 1991), although the general point is agreed. Ice would be a better example than snow, but there remain a number of problems relating to the structure of the Inuit language.

From these points, it is easy to argue that we live in a world that is socially constructed and that through discourse, ways of seeing are instituted that can be sustained over long periods. For instance, Foucault refers to the medical gaze, which he identifies as a novel way of viewing and classifying the body and whose inception he traces to the end of the eighteenth century (Foucault 1984, p. 54). However, although the notion of discourse gives us purchase on key aspects of how life is lived and organized, such a notion can overreach itself and argue that the world and how we relate to it comes *solely* through language. This paper seeks to intervene at this point and argue that discourse, although important, cannot be made to do all the work in the constructing that takes place and that processes by which articulation—the making something visible and tractable—occurs need further investigation. In short, it seeks to trace an aspect of how people and things become expressive and how these processes are entwined in the processes of organizing.

ICTs (information and communicative technologies) are a central part of these processes of organizing and their integration into social life has become so seamless as to increasingly become less worthy of comment in itself. Barglow (1994, p. 201) relates the story of a Tibetan teacher coming to the U.S. where she exclaims that,

In America you are always talking to machines. You go to the bank and you talk to a machine. You go to the BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] and you talk to a machine. You call your friend on the phone and you talk to a machine.

However these machines change: mainframes have given way to networks; organizationally produced software has given way to the consumption of mass produced software; wired networks are giving way to wireless networks, and so on. Thus a discussion on the discourse and ICT can focus on discourses that are articulated and sustained with ICT: their potential, their capability, their processing and provision of discourse *qua* information, their knowledge characteristics. Here we investigate the drawing in and drawing together of disparate elements by invoking and using ICTs. A second arena of discussion is to concentrate on how the notion of ICT, its definition and its capabilities change. Hence the discourses surrounding the capacities of ICTs 10 years ago are different than the discourses of today and presumably of what will be said in 10 years time. It is this second arena that this paper uses as an exemplar of the processes by which ICTs are invoked to create, sustain, and transmute discourses about organizations and the potentials of organizing. What I wish to use is the idea of the rapid changeability of management discourse, often referred to as management fashions or fads, to investigate the ways in which ERP systems have been reinvented from enterprise systems within organizations to hubs that

enable e-business to flourish. In doing this, I wish to critique current notions of changing management fashion by focusing in on *how* discourses change in relation to ICTs and the importance of vendors and consultants in particular in these processes.

The paper begins by exploring the concept of discourse and argues that solely focusing on discourse is a mistake. Instead, a relational approach in which subjects and objects mutually interact is put forward as a more useful explanation. The next section discusses the ideas of management fashions and fads focusing on the well known work by Abrahamson and Kieser. This leads to a section showing how ERP systems appear to follow the pattern of a management fashion. It is at this point that the paper critiques the idea of management fashion and the primacy of discourse by looking more carefully at the ERP example. The argument centers on how ERP systems have become strongly networked in organizations although their appearance in discourse is quite limited. In place of discourse, the idea of articulation is put forward as a more helpful way of explaining what has occurred and in indicating areas that are of importance in the researching of ICTs and organizations.

## 2 DISCOURSE AND OBJECTS

A focus on discourse as a mode to give insight into organizations and management has become evident in the last 20 years. Much of the interest derives from Foucault who, at one point, describes discourse as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972, p. 49) Rabinow (1984, pp. 9-10) argues Foucault’s conception of discourse was an attempt to bracket discourse off from social practices and institutions in which it was embedded. However this project underwent change and became more materialist. In Rabinow’s opinion, Foucault was trying to overturn ideas that discourses were reflections of “something supposedly ‘deeper’ and more ‘real’” (ibid). A general interest in the constructive role of language has also grown from the influences of writers such as Garfinkel (1967). Narration is now seen as an important mode by which organizing is accomplished and sustained (Czarniawska 1997). Indeed, it is difficult not to accept that we live in a world that is mediated and constructed linguistically.<sup>2</sup> In such a world, questions of who speaks and how silenced voices are given outlets come to the fore as a rich seam of feminist writing bears witness (see Haraway 1991, pp. 71ff). Issues of technology bring discussions of discourse into sharp relief. A key question

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<sup>2</sup>For alternative views, see Chia (2000) and Wittgenstein (1981).

centers on if or how technologies can participate in discourse. Are they mute objects, do others have to speak for them, or are they articulate?

Some 100 years ago, Simmel (1968) argued, a key problem was being continually faced with objects which cannot be assimilated (see Miller 1994). Frequently, a contrast is made between small scale traditional societies in which the few objects are (or were) invested with meaning and large scale modern societies with a multitude of mass produced artefacts in which meaning is absent (cf. Latour 1999).<sup>3</sup> However, on reflection, we can see that the way and care in which people treat objects, from ritual car washing to ritual house ornamentation, indicates that such simple distinctions are inappropriate and objects are invested with meaning (see Forty 1986). An argument can be made that people are constantly in a process of ordering objects in ways that invest them with meaning. This can be manifested in the ordering principles of museums, for example, or in the ways in which the parts of towns are designated as “old” and therefore tourist sites (Miller 1994, pp. 399-401). However this process is not one way and people are ordered by the disposition of objects, from the gendering of objects, to the ways in which houses are constructed and furnished (ibid). In short, a relational approach is useful in which both subjects and objects can act and be acted upon. Arguably, discourse is an important aspect of these processes, but is not the sole explanation. This will be taken up later when the notion of articulation as opposed to discourse is discussed more fully. First, I wish to explore an arena where discourse is seen as important—the arena of management fashion— and using this notion consider the rise and apparent demise of ERP systems. The outcomes of this investigation suggest that a sole focus on discourse as a mechanism of explanation is misplaced.

### 3 MANAGEMENT FASHIONS AND FADS

In the last dozen years, an interesting literature has developed on management fashions and fads (see Abrahamson 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild 2000; Kieser 1997; *Organization* 2001). The discussion is centered on the importance and frequency of change in the techniques and discourses of management. This is not necessarily seen as pathological as the terms fashions and fads imply. Abrahamson has been influential in developing this debate and I will briefly explore some of his definitions and ideas.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Heidegger has elevated this distinction into an argument that small scale technologies invite us to *poiesis* (bringing-forth) whereas modern technologies lead to *gestell* (en-framing) and a forgetfulness of being (Heidegger 1977; see Bernstein 1991, pp. 79-141).

Abrahamson (1996, p. 255) argues that management fashions are not just aesthetic fashion, but are “deadly serious matters” for business schools and scholars. If business schools and their academics are seen to be lagging in management progress, then they may be seen as undeserving of societal support. Second, he argues that the demand for management fashions is shaped by sociophysiological forces, and by

a desire to learn about management techniques that would help them [managers] respond to organizational performance gaps opened up by real technical and economic environmental changes....[A management fashion] is a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress (Abrahamson 1996, pp. 255-256).

He argues that the choice of management technique is guided by twin norms: that management knowledge will progress over time (progressive and normative) and that management techniques will be rational; they are efficient means to attain important goals.

Abrahamson’s argument is based on institutional theory and the idea that organizations seek to attain isomorphism with similar organizations. Partaking of fads furthers isomorphism. This is linked with the notion of progress which, as others have remarked, sits uneasily with that of institutional theory (Kieser 1997, p. 53). Kieser makes two other points: first he suggests that Abrahamson seeks to differentiate between management techniques and rhetoric, a distinction he argues cannot be maintained. Finally, he takes issue with Abrahamson’s contention that it is sociophysiological forces that shape demand. Kieser, on the other hand, argues that rhetoric is the most important feature and that management fashions are analogous to fashion in aesthetic forms.

Kieser suggests that while rhetoric is the “main input currency” it takes place in an arena of management fashion where different groups contend: consultants, professors, publishers, the trade press, etc. “The participants can achieve their individual goals of highest possible profit...by widening the arena through luring further participants into it” (Kieser 1997, p. 57). Kieser goes on to argue that the management best seller is a key ingredient in the popularization of management fashions. They are often associated with the creation of management myths based on examples of extraordinary change credited to companies that have used the new fashion. In short, a management fashion holds the promise of bringing order to a disorganized world. Managers are the most important players in the arena. It is they who must pick up fashions (to enhance their power relations; to avoid missing the boat) and it is they who are the consumers of fashions.

Kieser's argument is more persuasive than Abrahamson's as it focuses more satisfactorily on the role of rhetoric in management fashion. It shows a relational arena where different actors attempt to extend networks of influence through rhetorical means. In a way, this is an arena of discourse *par excellence* and what I wish to do is use the example of ERP systems to exemplify these ideas and then show why technologies cannot simply be equated with discourse.

#### 4 ERP SYSTEMS AS MANAGEMENT FASHIONS

I will not begin by defining what ERP systems are. Indeed, a contention of this paper is that ERP systems are to be found in the circumstances of their engagement in the world rather than elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> ERP systems are seen by some as "the answer to the Information Age's wildest dreams" (Davenport 2000b, p. 6). To others they are "comprehensive packaged software solutions that integrate organizational processes through shared information and data flows" (Shanks and Seddon 2000, p. 243). We will begin by considering ERP systems as an example of a management fad.

Both Abrahamson and Kieser use numbers of publications as a measure of the popularity of a specific management fashion (see Abrahamson 1996, p. 258; Kieser 1997, p. 51).<sup>5</sup> Similar processes were used to seek to measure the popularity of ERP systems using three sets of data. First, the contents of a popular internet-based IT journal, *Information Week*, were surveyed. Second, the titles of papers submitted to three well known IS conferences were analyzed. Finally, the contents of the ABI/Inform management database (only refereed articles) were measured. The results of these three sources are shown respectively as Figure 1, Table 1, and Figure 2. These measures were seeking to identify frequency in the popular IT press (Figure 1); usage in academic conferences (Table 1) which should be quicker to publish than in academic journal articles (Figure 2). Broadly, the figures bear out expected trends. Figure 1 shows that the term ERP appeared in 1996, reached a peak in 1999, and has fallen back almost as swiftly to a relatively low level in 2001. In other words, the frequency of usage of ERP in the popular press has peaked and shows a bell shaped curve. In the conference literature, ERP as a term appears in 1997 and

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<sup>4</sup>This draws on a statement by Ingold (1996, p. 152), "Thus, the meaning of speech, like that of song, lies in the circumstances of the speaker's *engagement* with the world: it is not something that precedes that engagement, and which it serves to deliver" (emphasis in original).

<sup>5</sup>Abrahamson uses the ABI/Inform database and also measures the thickness of an annual proceedings of a conference in the area; Kieser uses the WISO database.

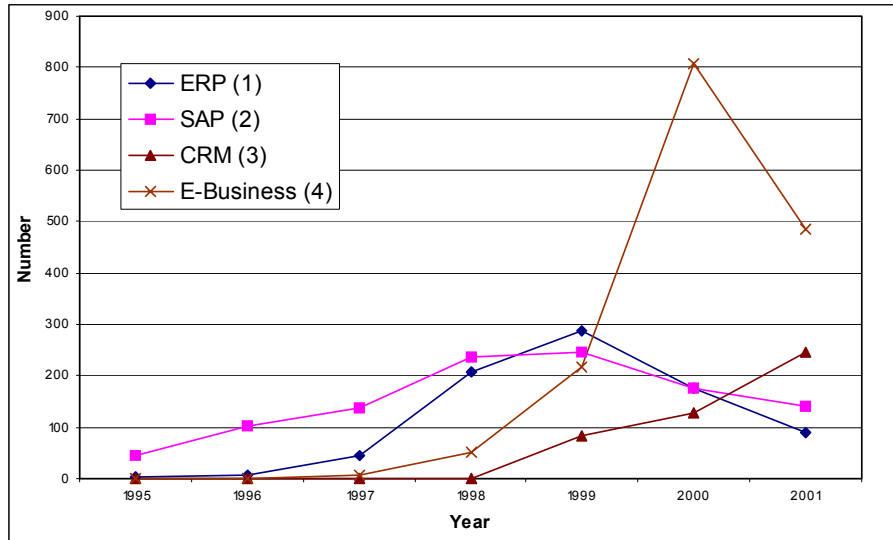


Figure 1. Number of Articles Using Specific Words in *Information Week*  
(Source: *Information Week*, Various Years)

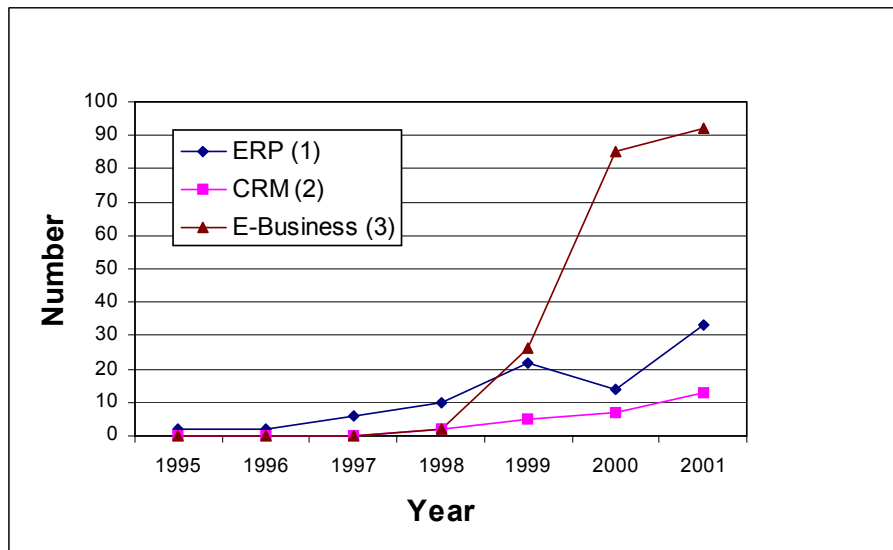


Figure 2. Number of Articles Using Specific Words in ABI/Inform  
Refereed Publications (Source: ABI/Inform Databases)

Table 1. Conference Papers Using ERP in Title in Three Major IS Conferences  
(Source: Klaus et al. 2000; Conference Web Sites)

Conference	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
ICIS*	1	3	5	6	4
AMCIS**	1	1	29	24	29
ECIS†	0	2	1	3	2
Total	2	6	38	33	35

\*International Conference on Information Systems; \*\*Americas Conference on Information Systems, †European Conference on Information Systems

reaches a plateau in the years 1999, 2000, and 2001. Academics, it appears, remain steadily interested in ERP systems and the reaching of this plateau of interest coincided (or slightly lagged) the peak of interest found in the popular press. In the academic published literature, ERP grows, albeit unevenly, up to the latest available data in 2001. Published articles, it appears, have not or have just reached a peak and lag the decline of interest exemplified in the popular IT press by some two to three years.

These figures raise many interesting questions: by what mechanisms are management fashions promoted; how are they sustained; how do they decline? First, let us look at the promotion of management fashion.

Abrahamson argues that rhetoric is important, but this argument is tempered by propositions such as

if there exists *unmet demand* for a certain type of management technique, then one or more techniques belonging to this type will become fashionable, if they are created, selected, processed, and disseminated by the management-fashion-setting community (Abrahamson 1996, p. 257, emphasis added).

This notion of unmet demand needs further exploration. In terms of discourse discussed earlier, we should expect that a discourse relating to ERP systems should also shape its objects. Therefore, we can suppose that unmet demand is as much a manifestation of the discourse than a force external to rhetoric as Abrahamson proposes. He argues that the forces influencing demand center around six forces: psychological desires of managers to appear individualistic and progressive; management action in the face of disappointment of managerial expectations; as a response by lower reputation organizations to the adoption of a fashion by higher reputation organizations; macroeconomic fluctuations; labor strife; and finally, as a response to technical contradictions within organizations (ibid, pp. 258-260). Obviously, the analysis of articles above does not give us



purchase on the arguments advanced by Abrahamson. At this point, we can only suggest following Foucault and those who have interpreted his ideas in organizations, that a focus on discourse, would suggest, *contra* Abrahamson, that most of the forces can be explained differently. Individuals and subjectivity are shaped by discourse and practices rather relying on psychology (Foucault 1980); that shortfalls in managerial expectation are created through discourses as recognized independently; that responses to macro economic indicators are, in turn, mediated by discourses; that equally both labor strife and managerial response are also mediated through discourse (Knights and Collinson 1987); and finally, that technical contradictions are as much manifestations of discourse as they are self evident facts (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis 1994).

Turning to the decline of a management fashion, Abrahamson has two lines of explanation. The first is a usage of forces such as macro economic conditions, labor strife, and technical contradictions. We have already pointed to work that lays out the ground of critique in these cases. The second line of argument is advanced in Abrahamson and Fairchild (2000), where they argue that there are a variety of possible exogenous forces but that the

exogenous forces that do trigger management fashions are the few, among the many, that management discourse both pushes to the top of many fashion consumers' agendas and relates to organizational performance gaps that management techniques could eliminate (ibid, p. 713).

This appears a more congenial argument in relation to discourse, but it still ignores the probability that performance gaps are themselves identified, measured, and articulated as part of discourses that are linked to the promotion of a new managerial fashion. In other words, rather than as Abrahamson and Fairchild propose that a management fashion collapses before another fashion takes hold, a focus on discourse suggests that the decline of one management fashion is intimately linked with rise of another as it seeks to explain shortcomings of a previous fashion in terms of the novel fashion's benefits.

Kieser's (1997, pp. 68-69) argument on the demise of management fashions is once again more appealing. He argues that the success of a management fashion leads both to it becoming diverse and even meaningless as it is reinterpreted in a multitude of ways, and second, that other fashion designers denounce existing fashions to replace them with their own—"murder" as he calls it. He also proposes that sometimes a fashion produces dysfunctional effects that lead to a counter-fashion. The former two arguments can be seen to accord to a relational view of discourse discussed above while the latter does not, as with Abrahamson, as dysfunctional effects are affects of discourse not entities in their own right.

To summarize, the notion of management fashion gives an explanation of what can be observed about ERP systems through the mediation of publication statistics. What is now needed is to use aspects of the ERP example first to develop the notion of management fashion and second to question the primacy of discourse. These are the issues that the remainder of the paper addresses.

## 5 CRITIQUING DISCOURSE AND MANAGEMENT FASHION

As was seen above, the frequency of ERP systems in the popular IT press declined after 1999 (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Decline, as we have seen, has been explained as due to exogenous forces; or as due to murder, lack of definition, or dysfunctional effects. If we look at the frequency of mentions of ERP systems in the popular IT press using *Information Week* as an example, it is clear that a discussion of a next step for ERP systems arises as early as 1997. This is two years before the observed peak of ERP popularity. For example, Ron Wohl, a senior vice president of Oracle, is quoted as saying, “People want solutions to as many of their business problems as they can get. ERP is a solution to a piece of their business problems. No one wants just ERP anymore” (Stein 1997). The argument about change moves in two, somewhat contradictory, directions. First, as the quote shows, demand is seen as coming from customers based on their perceptions of business problems, but note that these issues are articulated by a vice president of Oracle, a vendor of ERP systems. Second, there is concern that having one extended ERP system will lock the customer completely into the products of that company. Such a discussion shows us evidence of customers requiring change as well as a perception that ERP vendors may be able to dictate the future pace of change once their systems have been installed. It shows two interesting features: a concern about the future and an appreciation of what we can call embodiment. The former has been widely reported in the IS literature. Friedman refers to it as a confusion of the tenses when what should happen is conflated with what is taking place leading to grandiose claims for IS systems (Friedman 1989). Using Bauman, we could also identify this as indicating something more general; an attitude Bauman associates with modernity. As he says,

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<sup>6</sup>A purpose of the paper is to explore the notion of management fashion in relation to ERP systems rather than systematically address the rise and fall of the phenomenon. Instead, one aspect is covered: the decline of ERP systems as a term.

Being modern came to mean, as it means today, being unable to stop and much less able to stand still. We move and are bound to keep moving...because of the *impossibility* of ever being gratified: the horizon of gratification... move[s] faster than the faster of the runners (Bauman 1999, p. 28).

The second point on embodiment demarcates an important issue in relation to the notion of discourse. Although Foucault and others have, at times, put forward the self-referential characteristics of discourse formations, it is clear that when it comes to ERP, companies, once they have installed the system, find themselves in a network of relations. Some of these relations surround what can be called the artefact that is the ERP. Of course, this, in itself, is elusive as the materiality of the system can be identified in the hardware, but the software and the other aspects that are needed (trained users, maintenance engineers, consultants, etc.) are more difficult to identify. As Latour has remarked, these relations often start to manifest when a technology doesn't work and then maintenance engineers, vendors, consultants, and others suddenly come into view (Latour 1987). Nonetheless, the implementation of an ERP system creates a series of relations that cannot simply be abandoned. For example, the effort of putting in an ERP system is widely reported (see Davenport 1998; Gill 1999) and shareholders require evidence that the large financial investment in ERP has produced returns representable in financial terms (Stein 1999b). Thus, the discourse of ERP becomes embodied in both artefacts *and* in a set of relations with others that limit the demise of an ERP system. Put simply, the system is often too interconnected to be easily removed and the publicity that surrounds a company that does abandon an ERP system tends to show this point (Stein 1999b). Thus, the argument here is that discourses can disappear in some settings, but, in others, it becomes progressively more difficult as that discourse is embodied in increasing sets of stable relations.

Thus far we have ignored those who literally profit from ERP systems: vendors and consultants. Vendors have difficulties in a typical management fashion: they do well, often very well, on the upturn, and have problems on the downturn. ERP is a good example: in the good times, one analyst commented that "these [ERP] packages were practically walking themselves out the door" (Stein 1999a). A downturn came about through market saturation and vendors then made moves to develop ERP systems for smaller companies (see Greene-meier 2001). Perhaps more significantly, ERP vendors sought to reposition themselves as companies that were not just enterprise oriented but linked to customers (customer relationship management, CRM), suppliers (supply chain management, SCM), and used the Internet (Chen 2001; Davenport 2000a). Why make these moves? Simply, vendors need to continue to create growth and ensure profitability. In 1999, Kevin McKay, CEO of SAP America, identified

the financial community as a major player for a vendor such as SAP: “Because growth rates are not what they were in the past, the financial community likes to assume the early demise of the ERP industry” (Stein 1999a). Therefore vendors need to create new products to sell to customers in what are seen as saturated markets. In retrospect for most of the ERP vendors, e-business has proved to be a new source of growth (see Aberdeen Group 2001). The changes at SAP, the largest ERP provider, illustrate this point.

SAP has always been closely identified with ERP systems and produced the earliest ERP systems (R2 mainframe based and R3 client server based). In 1999, SAP produced mySAP.com, which sought to create a portal based system. This has been followed through so that SAP now offers products in CRM and SCM which can link to existing ERP systems and all these can be accessed through mySAP.com portals, which are customized desktops that enable individual employees or classes of employee to link different applications relatively seamlessly (see Aberdeen Group 2001; SAP 2002). The Aberdeen Group argue that the “results of three years of effort [by SAP] are finally emerging... it is now the leader. The new ‘com applications’—i.e., Portals, CRM, and Exchanges—will, in our opinion, compete effectively... [and] the core enterprise product suite [ERP] continues to evolve and improve at a strong pace” (Aberdeen Group 2001). Indeed, SAP portray themselves on their website as “SAP—30 Years in the Business of *E-Business*: 10 million users, 44,500 installations, 1,000 partners, 21 industry solutions” (SAP 2002, emphasis added).

SAP shows a pathway of a company that has moved from market saturation with poor prospects (see Stein 1999a) to the creation of new lines of business and plaudits from the financial analysts (Wassener 2002). SAP has developed CRM, SCM, and portal products which both redefine SAP (as an e-business) and reshape how these systems can be used through integration with existing ERP systems and the use of mySAP.com. Figure 1 also shows the references to SAP, CRM, and e-business in *Information Week*. These indicators show that the rise of SAP mirrored a rise of ERP as a cited name, but that a much slower decline of SAP’s name is evident. E-business comes into prominence very rapidly and peaks in 2000 while CRM continues to grow. Similar curves for e-business and CRM are found in ABI/Inform (Figure 2) with a difference being that there has been no fall-off in the rise of the term e-business.

To summarize, the evidence above points to vendors having an important role in the creation of management fashion and equally in attempts to create successors to previous fashions. However, in the arena of IT, prior fashions do not quietly slip away; they are often richly networked and are hard to get rid of. Instead, ERPs remain extremely widely used as Davenport (2000a) argued, but they are not topical in the trade IT press. We can speculate that the topicality of a particular term is linked to the purchase and implementation of systems. For instance, the trade press depends greatly on vendor advertising, which is greatest

when purchasing is at its peak. This places pressure on journalists when they choose what to write about.<sup>7</sup> Once these systems become securely networked in organizations, discussion fades away but the use of the systems does not. In this way, we can argue that the notion of fashions and discourse is unhelpful as it draws attention away from the use of IT systems. It is the very embeddedness of these systems that are implicated in them not being discussed, but they are still evident as a continuing academic interest tends to demonstrate (see Figure 2). Vendors like SAP still rely heavily on ERP systems—60 percent of licence revenues in 2001 come from ERP systems (SAP 2002).

## 6 DISCUSSION

So far I have tried to describe, critique, and exemplify the notion of management fashion. ERP systems appear to fit this notion well: references to them appear in about 1996, peak in 1999, and then decline almost equally rapidly after that. They mirror the examples of quality circles (Abrahamson and Fairchild 2000) and those given by Kieser (1997). Thus, as rhetoric is seen by both authors as a central mechanism of management fashion, discourse should be equally important in the example of ERP systems as well. To discuss this, I would like to draw on the idea of articulation.

Discourse, as has been discussed above, can be seen as an effect of power (Foucault 1984, p. 61) and can be either seen as self-referencing or as being relational to other practices. Discourses allow things to be said but they circulate in a “regime of truth” (ibid, p. 74). Articulation, drawing on Latour (1999, pp. 142-144) allows subjects and objects to speak, to act, and to be defined. It is through processes of articulation that sets of attributes and competencies are brought together to form entities such as ERP systems. For example, ERP systems used in large organizations can be said to articulate notions of what is important in running the organization. A finance director of a major company in England commented that, after a SAP system was installed, he “found that as group finance director I was beating some poor chap over thehead 1500 miles away down the line to say we need this, I want this information” (Westrup and Newman 2002). The information, which previously was seen as unimportant and distant in every sense of the word, had become seen as very important in the running of the business. However, this information was articulated as a coding entered, processed, and communicated through an ERP system. Articulation, in other words, covers more than just speech, it

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<sup>7</sup>I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

encompasses varieties of practices, some of which we might call discursive, that make things knowable, capable of action, and of discussion.

In the case of ERP systems seen as management fashion, different forms of articulation can be seen at work. First, there are the traces of the phenomenon itself derived from citations in literatures. Figures 1 and 2 indicate that something is happening, but closer exploration shows that a questioning of ERP was already occurring prior to the peak of citation and indeed much of the literature in 1999 refers to a crisis in the ERP market. For example, the AMR Research Enterprise Applications Conference in June 1999 had presentations by consultants on topics such as “Enterprise Application Strategy in the Post-ERP World” (Caruso 1999). Thus, as we might expect, there are varieties of opinion about the status of ERPs. In research we carried out in 1999 and 2000 in large English companies, it was interesting that no interviewees even mentioned Internet-enabled applications and yet the popular press, vendors and consultants had been discussing these issues for over a year (Caglio et al. 2000).<sup>8</sup> It has been discussed already that despite evidence of the demise of ERP systems, it is quite likely that more ERP systems are working at present than ever before. In other words, the articulation of management fashion tends to focus on the marketplace for, in this case, ERP products. And, as has been suggested already, when an ERP has stabilized and is engaged in complex relationships in an organizational setting, the system starts to become unremarkable. Of course, that doesn’t mean that these relationships continue to be stable: a systematic problem might be identified which requires work on ERP systems. A recent analogy is that of legacy systems, the identification of the millennium bug, massive work to fix it, followed by little independent evidence of its existence (see Vurdubakis 2001). In short, ERP systems appear to be management fashions in terms of the research literature, but actually they do not conform to the literature model as ERP systems remain in place even though literature references to them have declined.

A second form of articulation centers on how management fashions die. For ERP systems, pressures for change came from many areas. First, competing products demonstrated (articulated) that further enterprise computing was possible and potentially useful. The examples are the rise of companies such as Siebel in customer relationship management and i2 in supply chain management. Pressures then developed from customers for change to existing ERP products (Stein 1999a). Second, the marketplace that came into being with the introduction of ERP systems became saturated while vendors remained under pressure to continue the growth they had achieved in the past. The articulation here is

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<sup>8</sup>Accountants and IS managers were interviewed in nine companies that operated in different sectors in England and in Italy (see Caglio et al. 2000).

commonplace: no more orders could be garnered from large companies. Third, the rapid expansion of the Internet gave an indication of the shortcomings of ERP systems.<sup>9</sup> This is perhaps the closest we can find to an exogenous technological force discussed by Abrahamson (1996). The advent of discussions centered on the Internet raised expectations of what might be possible, but it did not, in itself, lead to a demise of ERP systems. Instead, it was the vendors of these systems that have repositioned themselves so that they are both the vendors of e-business while receiving the majority of their licence fees from ERP systems. To do this, they have built products that harness the potential of the web and can be used to link up disparate sources including existing ERP systems. SAP's mySAP.com is an excellent example of these moves (SAP 2002). Thus, the vendors have ensured that their current customer base is protected while being given *additional* products that can be shown to harness the potential of the Web. These are the products that are shown to articulate what the Web can do. In terms of Abrahamson's argument, we can say that the exogenous technological force of the Internet has been translated into new product families, but in one sense there is no technological *force* there, instead we find articulations that represent that force—endless discussions being one formulation; browsers such as Netscape and Internet Explorer are another.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This paper sought to do two things. First, it considered ERP systems as a management fashion. This came from a brief discussion on discourse, a description and initial critique of the notion of management fashion, and the display of evidence of ERP systems. Second, it argued that ERP systems cannot be considered as management fashions even though they apparently share many of the characteristics. Instead, it sought to critique the notion of management fashion through a critique of discourse. It was argued that discourse can have too many structuralist overtones where self-referring discourses are seen to shape practices. In its place, the paper sought to put discourse in a more relational mode as one aspect of articulation: a process in which subjects (and objects) speak, act, and are defined. This is more than speech and encompasses all representational practice which takes place in a relational arena. ERP systems, it was argued, have not disappeared although evidence of their decline in discourse appears to mirror a decline in a management fashion. Rather it is

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<sup>9</sup>It can be noticed that the expansion of the Internet came through its articulation by new, simple browsers such as Netscape and Internet Explorer. This made it possible for most users to start to navigate the Web.

proposed that the relations which articulated ERP systems as important now find them less so. Vendors and consultants no longer seek to spread the word about ERP systems; the trade press is less interested in installed systems instead of systems being currently purchased; users consider that they are now dealing with a more known quantity; and, most importantly, most ERP systems have bedded into a strongly relational setting in companies where their articulation in the popular press becomes unimportant. In this relational setting, users and ERP systems have accommodated each other: users have been trained and have learned by doing while ERP systems have changed to accommodate the ways of the organization. Generally, senior management has started to consider that they can manage with these systems although concerns about cost effectiveness often remain. Vendors and consultants retain important niche roles as consultants in explaining how more can be got out of the capabilities of these systems. Shareholders remain uncomfortable about return on investment. All of these relations are mediated through articulations. To take one example, consultants hone their skills by articulating the capacities of ERP systems which are not evident to the owners of these systems. In the same process, managers become knowledgeable and discerning consumers of ERP systems and in turn they find their own jobs being redefined with SAP skills perhaps being seen as essential (Westrup and Newman 2002).

Three implications flow from the argument and findings of this paper. First, ICT researchers should not overly focus on discourse (or discourse analysis) as a strategy to understand ICTs and organizations. Arguably, the idea of articulation is more central to an analysis of this area where entities such as ERP or consultants become known objects with distinct properties through processes which establish an ERP system or a consultant. These processes are often linguistic but not always so, yet the relations that are constantly being made and remade are very important in how the effects of ICTs manifest. Second, looking at management fads and fashions shows that the management of ICTs often has similar characteristics, but technologies such as ERP are different from many other fashions as they often become more interconnected in organizations. Their appearance in discourse may diminish while they remain important mechanisms in organizing modern organizations. Finally, as the previous point implies, the analysis of ICTs should not stop once they are implemented or once they become commonplace. Indeed, analyzing ICTs once this has occurred is more interesting because it can shed light on how technologies are routinely interwoven in the organizing, maintaining, and enjoyment of social life.

In short, the notion of management fashion presents a discourse centered on transience of managerial technique and action. What it can miss are the mechanisms that exhibit more continuity. Technologies are one such mechanism where discourses become somewhat stabilized and rearticulated. Vendors, consultants, and the trade press in search of profit are another.



## 7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some evidence in this paper has come from a CIMA sponsored study on *The Implications of ERP Systems for Management Accountants*. I would like to thank my colleagues, Mike Newman, Mustafa Jazayeri, and Ariela Caglio, the respondents and interviewees in the study, and CIMA for their support.

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