Of managers, ideas and jesters, and the role of information technology

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ABSTRACT

In this article we examine the role of information technology in the relationship between ideas and managers. In particular, we explore the capacity of ideas to take hold of managers and organizations, facilitated by information technology, and contest the dominant view that ideas are passive instruments for choice. Rather, we claim that ideas tend to own us. We invert the position of the human actor and the idea, and give ideas the character of an enactor, a prerequisite for an entity that may “imprison humans”. Strategies for detachment are then needed such as the old institution of jestering.

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1. Of ideas and managers

To have ideas is seen as distinctly human: Wells (1920) states, “Human history is in essence a history of ideas.” And now we live in an age when desire for the quest for the new and innovative is expressed by politicians, researchers, and managers alike (e.g. Finland’s National Innovation Strategy, 2010); Meyer, 1996; Hamel and Breen, 2007). Many information technology platforms have been developed and are commercially available for idea and innovation generation. Yet, apparently the people and organizations that are supposed to be innovative are frequently trapped by their current thoughts and experiences. Illustratory is a statement by a well-known management author who lamented the difficulty of “escaping one’s past ideas.” Viewing himself a prisoner, his past published ideas had devoured him, they limited his ability to imagine or credibly present new, different ideas.

Ideas are generally thought as opinions, beliefs, or convictions, and often included in plans and schemes. They are not commonly seen as actors in their own right. Rather, ideas are usually interpreted as near-commodities owned by people or organizations. A different, less common standpoint is represented by Karl Weick. He affords ideas independence when he states that ideas may generate their own context for development. Weick (2004, p. 657) describes how his ideas in his own research were generated by means of conceptual affinities: “ideas shape ideas, they lead onto other ideas, and they enact their own contexts.” Here, Weick bestows ideas the character of enactors, alongside the human actor. Weick continues: “Tactically, to follow these leads one must trust in the power of free association to reveal unexpected connections” (2004, p. 657). Furthermore, Van de Ven, when referring to paradigms, reminds us that, “a way of seeing is a way of not seeing” (1999, p. 119). Consequently ideas, similar to paradigms or metaphors, can be defined as (in part tacit) lumps of meaning that suggest and constitute reality (see also Castells (2009)), which Boland et al. (1994), building on Gadamer (1975, 1976), see as “an ontological structural element in understanding.”
Ideas play an important part in management theory and practice. Indeed, management history can be depicted as a history of management ideas (Hamel and Breen, 2007); this also means that ideas themselves do not, as Weick may see them, act on their own. A typical managerial representation views ideas as objects of aspiration or thoughts we can manipulate, dispose of and create at will (e.g. Kelley and Littman, 2001; Dodgson et al., 2008). They have an unfinished quality; in order to have (commercial or material) value, ideas need to be elaborated upon and realized as products or activities. Ideas are thus commonly viewed as instruments in the hands of managers and organizations, and are owned by them. Humans are in charge, they can adopt and jettison ideas at their discretion, and they can patent or copyright certain ideas. Even when ideas, such as lean manufacturing or time management, fundamentally shape management thinking and practice, they are seen as subservient to the managerial actor. A typical description of the relationship depicts the manager as the dominant partner, and the idea only as the manager’s appliance. This is perhaps similar to Orlikowski and Iacono’s call for “theorizing the artifact”: they claim information technology should not simply be taken for granted as a backdrop to organizational action. Information Technology is short-changed as an obedient and surrogate accompaniment to managerial actions (2001, p. 130) – a simple tool without the ability to affect its environments materially (Leonardi and Barley, 2008). We wish to reconsider the issue from the perspective of ideas.

2. (Socio)Materiality of ideas

Viewed from the dominant human actor perspective, ideas appear as information that technologies process. They are externalized, controlled, rationalized. They are separated from the work processes as external inputs much like technology (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). They have no power to shape except through managerial action (Leonardi and Barley, 2008). We see such disparaging externalization to be unfair to ideas and unhelpful to the understanding of organizational behavior. Agreeing with Weick’s (2004) testimony stated earlier, we can see that ideas have sociomateriality in that they shape their own context.

In this paper we argue that ideas often control and affect managers deeply. They shape organizational behavior and tend to stick around (Stinchcombe, 1965; Nelson and Winter, 1982). More appropriately, ideas can, therefore, be seen as social entities in their own right. They possess us to the point that managers often tend to be prisoners of some debunked idea that refuses to leave them. Sun Microsystems’ former CEO was blamed for waging war with Microsoft that had more to do with technological standards or ideology rather than business development (Garud et al., 2002). Many a quest is idea-driven: World literature recounts multiple instances where the hero has become obsessed with a particular idea he cannot escape. Don Quixote in Cervantes’ great novel is a story of a man madly obsessed with the idea of a knighthood. Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab is a tortured man, whose free will must be questioned and whose ability to fully command his actions is diminished; the idea of the white whale had possessed him. Similarly, many a manager has been unable to move beyond the existing strategic idea, manifesting severe cognitive inertia (or entrepreneurial zeal). Tripsas and Gavetti (2000) describe the inability of managers in Polaroid to adopt a particular business model (see also Lucas and Goh, 2009) despite making appropriate R&D investments.

Companies are strongly shaped by ideas upon founding. Google has an aspiration “Don’t Be Evil”; described as an informal corporate motto, it was suggested by Google employees Paul Buchheit and Amit Patel at a meeting. According to Wikipedia, Buchheit, the creator of Gmail, “said he ‘wanted something that, once you put it in there, would be hard to take out,’ adding that the slogan was ‘also a bit of a jab at a lot of the other companies, especially our competitors, who at the time, in our opinion, were kind of exploiting the users to some extent.’” Hence, the motto became a sort of essential idea of the company that did well by its customers (see also Jarvis (2009) for criticism). Stinchcombe (1965) suggests there are imprinting forces at the time of the organization’s founding that stay with the company even after the founders leave. A similar notion is described by Weick and Gilfillan (1971), who suggest that organizational routines and behaviors tend to persist even if they are arbitrary. Following Abrahamson’s (1991) theory of management fads, Baskerville and Myers (2009, p. 647) describe “IS fashion waves” that are transitory yet “represent bursts of interest in particular topics by IS researchers and practitioners”. To what extent founding or fashionable ideas dominate concurrent practice, may vary, but they do have influence beyond mere instrumentality. Fashion waves are actors in their own right.

3. Our contest

We contest the dominant view that ideas are mere instruments for rational or innovative choice facilitated by information technology. Witness the many commercially available ideation platforms (over 20 million hits in Google with the search words idea platforms!) with varying success rates. A similar, non-orthodox attitude to a related concept, information, is held by March and Sevón (1988) who write about idle talk, first as a form of (useful) system maintenance but then confess that contrary to dominant thinking in decision theory, they believe there is value to information without decision relevance (they call such information “gossip” to stress its non-relevance to choice processes) simply because of our need to understand and interpret “what is going on in life”. This view has been validated by the strong rise of social media (such as Twitter) which are squarely focused on social chatter in response to questions such as “what’s happening right now…?”. Facebook is another example of a social media platform that allows people to maintain their “social plumbing”. In such circumstances, ideas,
not unlike gossip, have a life of their own that humans are rarely able to control. Then, perhaps ideas, not managers, have the upper hand in organizations.

The view of ideas as primary relative to the human actor is not without precedent. Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) popularized the gene-centered view on evolution – selection acting at the level of genes rather than organisms. He also reintroduced the word ‘meme’ as a self-replicating unit of social evolution. Memes are like ideas that travel through diffusion, but they are not typically seen as social entities that are able to change themselves and other entities they meet during their travels. Scandinavian Institutional Theory (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, 2005) also depicts ideas that have the capability to travel and translate across people, organizations and cultures. The meaning of the concept of translation is adopted from Bruno Latour. According to Latour (1986, p. 267):

> ... the spread in time and space of anything – claims, orders, artifacts, goods – is in the hands of people; each of these people may act in many different ways, letting the token drop, or modifying it, or deflecting it, or betraying it, or adding to it, or appropriating it.

Czarniawska and Sevón (2005) claim that the concept of translation describes the emergence and construction of various types of connections around the globe, exactly because the word has many meanings: albeit usually associated with language, it also means transformation and transference. It attracts attention to the fact that a thing moved from one place to another cannot emerge unchanged: to set something in a new place is to construct it anew. Czarniawska states that a practice not stabilized by a technology, be it a linguistic technology, cannot last; it is bound to be ephemeral. A practice or an institution cannot travel; they must be simplified and abstracted into an idea, or at least approximated in a narrative permitting a vicarious experience, and therefore converted into words or images. Neither can words nor images travel until they have materialized, until they are embodied, inscribed or objectified, as only bodies or things can move in time and space (Czarniawska, 2002). If anything, information technology has helped such travel of ideas through time and space. In the continuous circulation of management ideas and practices, they then also change.

4. Ideas and information technology

In the following, we describe three notions through which ideas behave through information technology. Information technology can be seen to uniquely enable the travel of ideas to the extent that mass interaction and collaboration becomes possible (Zammuto et al., 2007). Therefore it is more important than ever to understand the role ideas play in such a reach, not only as objects of diffusion, easily encoded, but as agents of meaning, translatable yet often highly persistent.

Let us abandon for the moment, if we can, our deeply entrenched notion of humans as uniquely capable of action, and consider the world from the point of view of ideas traveling around. Seemingly, ideas not only meet people and other ideas (as we argue below), they also travel. Czarniawska and Sevón (2005) claim that such travel trajectories of ideas can be fascinating. Ideas travel in time and space by adapting, while maintaining their essential (recognizable) identity. In doing so, many ideas survive people and organizations. Holt (2008) tracked ideas central to jokes across history and found that some of the same jokes are told in today’s Hollywood movies as in the middle ages! However, when management ideas travel in space they do so, according to Czarniawska and Joerges (1996), by being translated into objects (models, books, transparencies), then sent to places other than those where they emerged, then translated into new kinds of objects, and then sometimes in actions, which, if repeated, might stabilize into institutions, which in turn could be described and summarized through abstract ideas, and so forth (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005).

One example of idea travel is reported by Pantzar (2008, p. 25), who documents how Tapiola Garden City in Finland was built as a “suitable and beautiful environment for everyone”. The related design ideas, supported by humans, travelled from the US (e.g. with Lewis Mumford) and Europe (e.g. with Ebenezer Howard and Patrick Geddes) and gained their expression in the garden city that was visited and ideated by luminaries from all over the world as an example of a “crime-free” proper living environment.

With the help of information technology, ideas are traveling everywhere today globally through translations and simultaneous transformations. In what follows, we wish to consider the role of ideas in managerial actions and information technology, while giving ideas their (long) due. First, we examine three notions that are pertinent to the relationship between ideas and managers, and to the important role information technologies play. We believe these three notions, acting alone or together, underpin the sociomatierality of ideas; that is, ideas, managers, and information technology creating (or offering) the context for action together rather than one defining the others (Zammuto et al., 2007). To consider the performative role that ideas play, is the first step toward a more balanced fusion that is constitutive of the sociomatieral entanglement (Butler, 1990; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008.).

4.1. First notion: ideas socialize

Ideas keep company and associate with other entities and as such, they are perceived as subjects; they meet other ideas or human actors. Some of their meetings we can trace via Google where we find several thousand hits for the phrase “ideas meet...”. The hits reveal that ideas meet new and old ideas, and that they are active in different contexts. Ideas are active in the business world; they meet organisations, for example entrepreneurial ventures, they meet industry, and new technol-
ogy. They also mingle with the financial world, meet money and investors, and they meet presidents of important countries. Ideas fight at war and win over weapons. Hence, ideas are often described as independent actors, engaged in (inter)action. They thereby come into contact with human actors and their environments.

However, even though in the above ideas are pictured as actors, we do not wish to claim any agency for them. Rather, we wish to consider them as if they had a capacity to travel, meet, exploit IT, combine (mingle or unite) with other ideas or human actors, and change, succeed and fail, as apparently they do. In this view we keep company with authors such as Schumpeter (1939), Quadagno (1979), Nelson and Winter (1982), Henderson and Clark (1990), and Hargadon and Sutton (1997). Legro (2000) writes about collective ideas and the difficulty of explaining their success or failure at a particular time. Yet it is the notion of memes (Dawkins, 1976) that perhaps best allows ideas their social character, although even then, ideas (or memes) are merely units of behavioral imitation (see also Payne et al., 1988) rather than social actors in their own right.

Social media are a unique platform for ideas to socialize. It is argued that people who think alike – that is, have similar ideas – tend to aggregate (see Aitamurto, 2010). Evidently similarity (“I am like this person”), rather than expertise, drives followers to Twitter. Consequently, one might argue that it is ideas that congregate as much as people. Somewhat uniquely, InnoCentive, a well-known Internet company, seeks to combine people who otherwise might not have a chance to exchange ideas. It has developed an Internet platform where problems and solutions can meet worldwide, creating a sort of giant “garbage can” (Cohen et al., 1972). Accordingly, as in the garbage can decision making model, the issue is not one of effectiveness but the ability of the problems and solutions to connect with each other. It is therefore a question of ideas “socializing” and having an opportunity to meet.

4.2. Second notion: ideas escape

A famous saying about “information wants to be free” (see e.g. Wagner, 2003) suggests that information is hard to control or contain. Similarly, ideas also escape. That ideas get out of control of people and organizations, that ideas take their own routes, change with context and those they meet has consequences. Authors, for example, cannot control their ideas even if they wanted to. Perhaps one of most well-known examples is Thomas Kuhn’s attempt to intervene in the wide use of the word ‘paradigm’, as it had become meaningless in his view. However, his insistent intervention to stop the practice entirely failed. Invoking Kuhn had become “like a talisman” (see Fuller, 1988), and he was unable to control its use. Information technologies may well be built on the very notion that ideas “like to be free” – they travel from one person to another, from one context to another, and gain different expressions and combinations; as Melian (2007) has described in her study of large software development project based on an open source-inspired system. Google is currently battling the freedom of ideas in its attempt to create a world’s most comprehensive digital library. While it is constantly running into intellectual property issues, it has not ceased its attempts. The idea of a digital world library is too enticing, too powerful to give up. Open source software is designed to help its constitutive code “escape” by free sharing and contribution. Such open code is then integrated in, and expanded upon, by new applications and uses.

4.3. Third notion: ideas organize

We mentioned earlier that Karl Weick pointed out that his own ideas are generated by means of conceptual affinities; that ideas shape ideas and lead to other ideas, thereby also enacting their own context. This is reminiscent of the general model of sense-making, for which a frame of reference – mostly mental model – guides the interpretation of an issue and at the same time may be shaped by the interpretation experienced. Thus, ideas organize other ideas. But ideas also organize humans. Even when it is often announced that (political) ideologies are dead (Fukuyama, 1992), still we experience many collectives who gather in order to influence the leaders of nations and large companies. We may also watch how different collectives dispute ideas that are important to them, such as those concerning our natural environment.

Ideas organize corporate activity too. Information technology systems vary a lot between companies. The question of technology and organizational structure dates back to Thompson (1967). However, information technology increasingly serves corporate strategy by organizing the company’s innovation activities or its operational management according to some dominant management idea, be it a metanational company or open innovation, for example. Davenport et al. (2008:R11) describe different knowledge management systems as appropriate to a management idea that organizes the activities in question:

Nokia Corp., the mobile-phone maker based in Finland, has benefited from having a knowledge-creation strategy that extends far beyond corporate headquarters. To take advantage of innovations in local offices around the globe, Nokia has setup Web sites and several different wikis to encourage employees to share what they know. Researchers are urged to record their observations in blogs and collaborate with universities, design firms, and telecommunications – industry partners. The knowledge that comes out of these efforts, which ranges from technical know-how to a broader understanding of the way different cultures address mobility, has helped Nokia remain a leading player in the world’s mobile-phone market.

Nokia, therefore, has operationalized the idea of a metanational, described by Doz et al. (2001), who suggest that innovations stem, and ought to be harvested, from around the world rather than be centralized at invention. The very idea of a ‘metanational’ was the organizing concept for Nokia’s future-oriented activities.

Procter & Gamble (P&G) has been lauded for implementing an open innovation approach, following Chesbrough (2006). Here, an idea – that of open innovation – has had wide influence on organizing a leading company’s business activities before such an idea became a well-known fad (or rather, P&G most likely contributed to its becoming so by setting an example or “best practice”). The justification for the approach is an idea – that it is necessary to source ideas beyond corporate boundaries to stay competitive (Hitt et al., 2006).

The three notions above – ideas socializing, escaping, and organizing – suggest the affordance of ideas and three likely mechanisms through which this influence is exerted. The discussion gives credence to the need to consider ideas as exerting often unaccounted influence beyond any servitude to managers’ strategies. Yet while people are held accountable for their actions, ideas go free supported by the constitutional right for free speech, for example, in the USA and other countries. Ideas not only survive people, they travel around the globe as objects of wisdom, fashion, or shared practice. It is interesting to note that behind the recent financial crisis was one idea many were holding up as the main culprit; the efficient market hypothesis. Yet psychologists have long known that human behavior is imitative, myopic, satisficing – behaviors that poorly fit the overarching model of rational markets, which nevertheless was the guiding principle to much of the risk assessments and investment decisions.

4.4. The danger of all powerful ideas

Whitney Griswold† once said that “ideas won’t go to jail”, presumably even if they do not perform as expected as management practice. Enron became bankrupt and its CEO was sent to jail, nevertheless Hamel (2000/2002) argues that the ideas behind the company were not to blame. Even potentially bad or very dangerous ideas can travel freely, and can do so using the Internet, which has become one of the most effective ways to spread, for example, terrorism, or to bring together masses of people for (rightful) demonstrations. Social media is enabling ideas to travel, escape, and organize ever faster. Ideas can get out of control, and this can result in not only a person’s mind but also their body becoming imprisoned. Perhaps then, it is not surprising that mechanisms have evolved to defend humans against the power of ideas.

Here we wish to introduce one such mechanism that provides a detachment between ideas and humans; the universal institution of a jester. Otto (2001) has documented the existence of court jesters worldwide at different historical periods, suggesting the importance of the role played by the king’s (or occasionally the queen’s) fool. But foolery is not left to the antics of history alone; jestering has relevance even in today’s corporate world. Kets de Vries (1990) notes that jester-like roles (and humor more generally) are a “guardian of reality” against orthodox or biased interpretation (see also Muller and Välikangas, 2003 for a case study). Such jestering may also be helpful to control the effects of hubris related to positions of power (cf. Kets de Vries, 2003). In the late-1990s British Airways even employed a person with a formal job description as the corporate jester (who was previously a senior executive at the firm) to aid corporate change. According to Paul Birch, the appointed jester, he was highly effective as a change agent for the first two years, after which he resigned.4

5. Of jesters

We have here argued for a perspective wherein ideas are much more persuasive than commonly held. We have claimed that ideas are powerful actors in the managerial environment and that current information technology is well-suited to serve the dominance and translation of ideas across places, cultures, and organizations. Managers, and humans more generally, occasionally become imprisoned by the idea of personal success; for example, exhibiting strong cognitive inertia even when faced with the necessity for change (Kets de Vries, 1990; Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000). Information technology is also tied to the notion of executive success: see for example Lucy Kellaway’s satire on a successful executive titled “Martin Lukes: Who Moved My Blackberry?” whose worklife is reported in the Financial Times and viewed through his messages transmitted through his ever-present smartphone. Signs of ideas ruling over managers (beyond Blackberries) include persistence with obsolete strategies or competitive notions (Barr et al., 1992), an obsession with a particular (faddish) management technique – such as TQM (Backstrom, 1999) – and the act of engaging in gross misbehavior or brutality in the name of an idea or cause (cf. Huntington, 1998).

We suggest a jester is a unique social mechanism that evolved to help humans cope with ideas that refuse to leave them. A jester represents a tradition dating back to medieval times that counterbalances, as one of its important functions, the power that ideas hold through a unique privilege, the freedom of (humorous and witty) speech. This freedom was gained because anything that a jester would say was “in jest” or the “utterance of a fool” – seemingly discounted yet still effective. A fool has many names: buffoon, clown, and minstrel.5 Klapp (1949, p. 157) writes:

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3 This is a quote from a speech by A. Whitney Griswold in 1952. See http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alfred_Whitney_Griswold.
4 Source: personal interview.
5 Also harlequin, jongleur, fou, narr, stultor, scurra . . . , and more.

Please cite this article in press as: Välikangas, L., Sevón, G. Of managers, ideas and jesters, and the role of information technology. J. Strateg. Inform. Syst. (2010), doi:10.1016/j.jsis.2010.06.001
A jester’s ability to mediate between ideas and humans stems from the privileges of being a fool (Otto, 2001). Only fools (and perhaps children, as in Hans Andersen’s story of the emperor’s missing clothes) can be forgiven the unique privilege, without demolishing the social order, of pointing out the (too) obvious, the forbidden, and the partially hidden, and making the ideas that embody us and that we perform, albeit sometimes unknowingly, visible. A jester facilitates the undressing of such masquerades. A good jester’s wit then, also serves as a lubricant to the reckoning. The nakedness that would be rejected off-hand, were it not coated with humor, now becomes more palatable. There is less denial. And the hold of ideas on us diminishes by laughing at ourselves. Consequently, a jester can be a potentially powerful agent of change, enhancing the organizational ability to escape obsolete or misguided ideas and absurd orthodoxies. Of course, jesters can also work toward maintaining the status quo. A jester can act as a social controller, by ridiculing those who profess heresy or are outsiders (Klapp, 1962).

Historically, jesters have mediated the battle of power between ideas and humans – and this is one of the reasons for their universal prominence as an institution in human history (Otto, 2001). The mediation is particularly visible in the case of court jesters and kings. To be able to jester, the first step is to remind the king of the fragility of his position. The jester “... becomes the person who through various means reminds the leader of the transience of power. He becomes the guardian of reality, and in a paradoxical way, prevents the pursuit of foolish action” (a modern interpretation offered by Kets de Vries, 1999, p. 757). The jester is thus a useful antidote for the persuasions of power that tend, over time, to diminish a person’s ability to judge his/her own performance and capabilities objectively (Kets de Vries, 2003).

Although a jester is a member of an old institution, the era of information technology has not left jesters behind. When Sun Microsystems was blamed for a server failure in eBay’s business operations, Forbes-magazine reports that Hewlett-Packard’s Web site featured a court jester and the headline, “Look who’s dropping the dots in dot com.”6 There are jesters in virtual games such as Gauntlet: Dark Legacy, and Chronomaster. In the Legend of Kyrandia, the player can eventually play the court jester named Malcolm.7 Jesters are often masters of the dark spirits in these games, evil rather than wise fools. One might argue that the Internet should enable much jestering due to its anonymity (“In the Internet, nobody knows you are a dog.”) However, it is a matter of empirical research whether anonymity would take some sting away from the jester’s intervention. Humor is known not to travel well in virtual communication, but a jester’s toolkit includes exposure, challenge, and surprise.

Were jestering a process, it should be more easily replicable in a virtual work place than if it is a role given to someone in particular (the fool). Consultants often bring innovation processes that may be akin to jestering in some way (such as creating spaces for playfulness), yet these behaviors may not last beyond the project. Therefore, we suggest there is an important role (or structural element) in replicating the historical situation, which means employing a jester, and creating the role and the institution, as the ruler’s confidant.

It is our challenge to the strategic information systems to develop technological and perhaps virtual means to counterbalance excessive use of power and the embeddedness of orthodoxy and lack of fresh challenge. The role of the jester, as an avatar or as a physical person, implies the right and skill to make people see themselves and their actions more clearly.

Paul Birch, the former British Airways’ corporate jester in the late-1990s, is quoted as saying: “Fools pinpoint absurdity by acting out the absurd. They act as a mirror in which people see their mistakes without having to admit to them. This enables Fools to challenge accepted wisdom and create new alternatives. As such, they’re entrusted with the sensitive task of managing and controlling change.”8 A jester can thus be a key player, the master interpreter, in the power struggle for the definition of the firm’s strategy, for example. Kaplan (2004) has documented strategy making as such a framing contest – a battle of whose view will prevail in directing the firm’s future. However, the function of a jester, the historical aide to such strategy contests in the courts of kings, is not visible in academic discussions about strategic information technology; nor is the potential defenses against the power of ideas more generally.

6. Potential research directions

We now provide our thoughts on some potential research directions that emerge from our ideas.

6.1. Detachment vs. engagement

Frequent advice for fostering innovation in companies centers on the passionate pursuit of a novel idea. Such engagement may be necessary in order to persist with the often initially unrewarding and challenging task of change. We suggest, however, that sometimes ideas are so persuasive that rather than engagement, the managerial task is one of disengagement and detachment for a more objective view; in particular when many managerial initiatives are dictated and adopted on the strength of a fad (Abrahamson, 1996).

8 http://idler.co.uk/features/you-have-to-be-mad-to-work-here/.
What effective strategies for disengagement exist in today's companies? How can managers develop their own independent point of view of an idea that reflects considerable “best practice”, a large followership, and perhaps attracts substantial press by renowned management gurus, and are performed (often at high financial cost) by consultants? Reputational effects tend to drive imitation rather than independent assessment in terms of the particular organizational context (cf. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Information technology may actually be worsening the situation by making it easy to observe network (the sort of winner-takes-it-all) effects that further favor an already popular idea or practice (cf. Maass, 2000). We suggest there is a need for research on IT strategies that counter the lock-in effects of initial fame (or hierarchical position) in order to facilitate the diversity of an idea universe rather than hegemony. For example, what about jester-like search strategies that would yield the least cited/referred ideas, articles, and practices for a study of the outliers? Such outliers have been found to be fruitful sources of study (Lewin, 1992).

6.2. Accounts of jestering

A jester may be a role, played by someone like Paul Birch at British Airways or it can be the frequent collective referencing to a cartoon such as Adam Scott’s Dilbert in corporate presentations. A jester may be an outside consultant too. But jestering, the performance of a jester, is an important social institution we should recognize. Many people we have talked with claim themselves to be jesters in corporate life. As a result, we should include jestership in our accounts of organizations and leadership. Not only because such jestery is probably common, but also because of its distinct benefits, as we have argued in this paper, as one of the few defense mechanisms humans, and managers, have against the power of possessive, sometimes obsolete, ideas. There is a need to describe and assess the roles potential jesters play in today’s corporations as aids for leadership and agents of change. Whether jestering translates to the world of virtual work is also a matter of research. How might IT support such detachment from the dominant point of view while perhaps protecting those who question the status quo? Anonymity might be one protection, but this may reduce the credibility of the challenge. Perhaps avatars with virtual life histories could be more acceptable as challengers – behavior in virtual meetings appears less constrained than in a conference room (according to the Virtual World@Work research group at SRIC-BI). Interestingly, the jester in virtual games is often an agent of dark forces and not to be trusted. The classical jester has perhaps been reduced into a mere narrative device abandoning its social responsibilities.

6.3. Cognitive breakthroughs

Research on cognition has long acknowledged the persistent role that frames and biases play (Barr et al., 1992). It appears difficult to change one’s mind even when there is much evidence to the contrary. We suggest one possible research avenue is to study cognitive breakthroughs in terms of the role of contest: who are the most effective contestors in terms of the breakthroughs, whether colleagues and fellow executives (Kaplan, 2004), outsiders such as consultants, or perhaps actors in a role of a jester who have similar privileges to challenge but also a lot of internal knowledge and no (political or self-serving) stake in the decision making outcome. A jester’s words are more reliable because a jester can never (or extremely rarely) become a king (Otto, 2001). Even more importantly, could such a role be generalized as an IT application – a sort of artificial intelligence system, not “Ask Jeeves”, but “Says Jester” – without sacrificing effectiveness? This would certainly add some excitement to (often rather predictable) corporate strategy meetings although such attempts can also have subversive qualities (Westwood, 2004).

The humorous absurdity or incongruity of it all eventually shifts perceptions (Polimeni and Reiss, 2006). “The fool breaks down the boundary between chaos and order, but he also violates our assumptions that the boundary was where we thought it was and that it had the character we thought it had” (Willeford, 1969, p. 39). In this regard, the jester may aid the accomplishment of cognitive innovation – a breakthrough or a break-out of the ideas that normally characterize or dominate our thinking. This breaking out of ideas can be collective too: the use of humor has been found helpful to navigating contentious situations in corporations (Hatch, 1997) while shared laughter communicates ease or non-threat (Ramachandran, 1998). However, humor is simply one strategy that jesters use to accomplish cognitive change, one that may have difficulty in traveling across cultures or virtually. We call for research on jester-like strategies, including a devil’s advocate (Nemeth et al., 2001) who might be effective in combating dominating cognitive consonance in executive teams, but also in the social media-type gatherings of the believers.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have challenged the notion that ideas are adopted and jettisoned at will. Instead, we propose ideas to be lumps of meanings, and actors in their own right: they have a capacity to travel great distances (even more so with the help of IT) and also socialize, escape, and organize. So persuasive can the sociomateriality of ideas be in influencing managers beyond fads and fashions, that we call for mechanisms for detachment – ways to defend ourselves against the potency of ideas. The bureaucratic organization is a form of defense against immersive engagement (Gay, 2008). Such rule-based routinization requires little engagement for the performance of a task. The use of consultants may allow a manager avoid taking a public stand because it is the consultants who make the action recommendation. Further, being a fashion follower is seen as an act...
of detachment. In management, fashion is one of the ways, not unlike bureaucracy, that introduces order and uniformity into what might seem like an overwhelming variety of possibilities. In this sense, fashion helps to come to grips with the present. At the same time, it "serves to detach the grip of the past in the moving world" (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005, p. 9).

In this article we have considered one additional separator between ideas and managers, the very old social institution of jestering. We have argued that a jester-like person may serve to mediate the battle between ideas and managers. We call for strategic information systems research and practice to consider ways in which jestering, virtually or bodily, could become a standard part of IT. A jester may be translatable as a virtual technology to the benefit of taking an objective and detached view of ideas that are seeking to overpower us. Here we break new ground: curiously, organization theory has not recognized the important role of a jester as a manager's aid, although the frequent use of Dilbert-like cartoons in management-related presentations may be one indication of the need for the occasionally different, more detached view. While humor has been studied in organizational contexts as a way to ease decision making situations (Hatch, 1997) or as a strategy for resistance in organizational hierarchy (e.g. Dwyer, 1991; Rodrigues and Collison, 1995; Collison, 2002,) the institutional role of a jester has remained unresearched in corporate contexts beyond the positioning of consultants (e.g. Firth and Leigh, 1998). When IT gives ideas ever more facility to socialize, escape, and organize, we call for the construction of sociomaterial, IT-enabled and institutional defense mechanisms to combat engagement with ideas without proper detachment. Humanity's actions can sometimes be inexplicable in their dark consequences – perhaps then, ideas rule over humans.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to FAS – The Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research, and to Tekes – The National Technology Agency in Finland – for financial support for researching and writing this article.

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Please cite this article in press as: Välikangas, L., Sevón, G. Of managers, ideas and jesters, and the role of information technology. J. Strateg. Inform. Syst. (2010), doi:10.1016/j.jsis.2010.06.001