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"BPR IS DEAD! LONG LIVE THE PROCESS!"
THE UPTAKE OF BUSINESS PROCESS
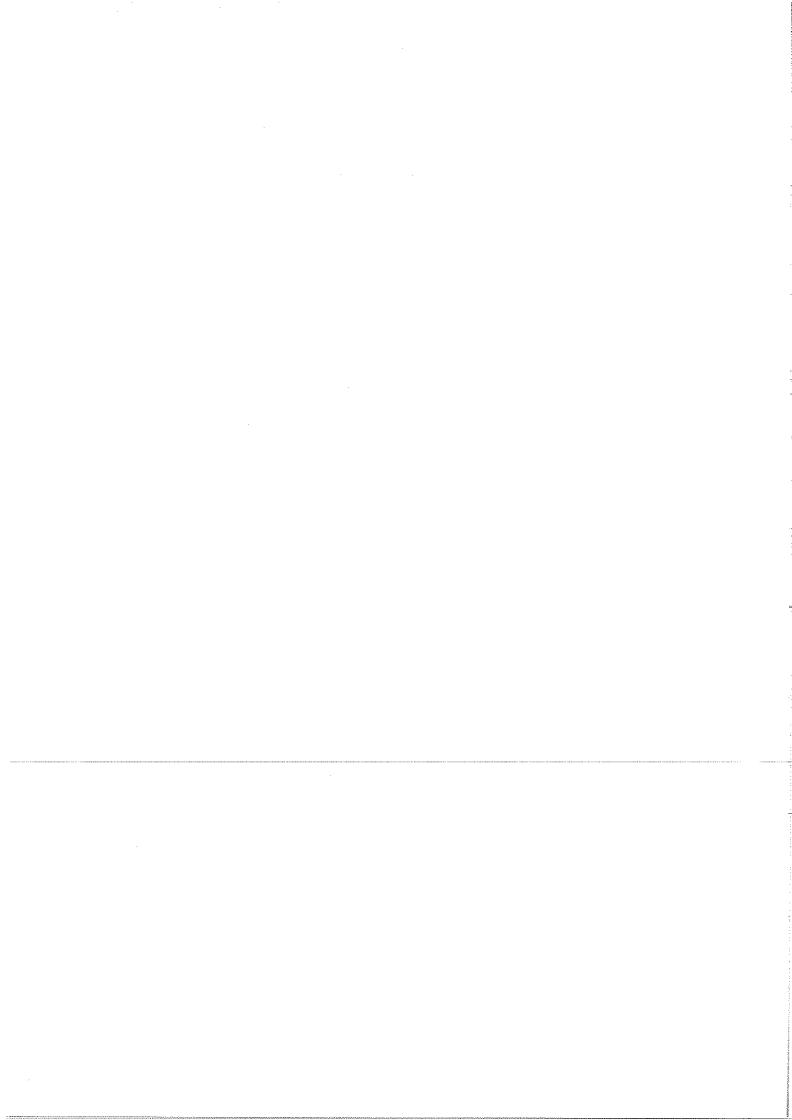RE-ENGINEERING IN NORWAY

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«BPR IS DEAD! LONG LIVE THE PROCESS!» THE UPTAKE OF BUSINESS PROCESS RE-ENGINEERING IN NORWAY[*]

1. BPR in Norway - a success, but of what kind?

This paper is a study of the uptake in Norway of a management concept called «Business process re-engineering», commonly abbreviated BPR. BPR denotes a set of ideas that emerged in the US in the late 1980s, mainly from the work of Michael Hammer and James Champy.[1] However, quickly it met with considerable interest in many other countries, Norway included. When we focus on the uptake of the concept, we study its appropriation in terms of transformations, redefinitions, and efforts of institutionalisation. A main hypothesis is that uptake usually means that the concept is appropriated through adaption.

An important reason to study such processes of uptake is that this provides an opportunity to increase our understanding of how management concepts are brought forward and made use of in the business of changing organisations. This has become a large and growing industry where we find many consulting companies as well as in-house departments and specialists. Moreover, the consulting business has become internationalised, and several large consulting companies are present in many countries. To study uptake of management concepts is thus to analyse an effort many believe is globalized. This means that there is an important issue about whether consulting practices are becoming uniform, and whether uptake mainly means that global consulting companies are transforming national practices to make them in accordance with the globalized strategies.

Changing organisations is a knowledge-intensive business, but in fact, it has been little studied. This may be due to the fact that the development of management concepts like BPR has been held in low esteem among most academics, including those interested organisations and leadership. The management discourse has a strong normative aspect because it is providing advice and a basis from which to design organisational structure and practice. This makes it an outsider in the social sciences, and management concepts have frequently been perceived in terms like hype, fad or fashion to emphasize lack of stability and seriousness (Abrahamson 1996).

The PRECEPT project is based on the idea that such assumptions are superfluous and misleading. While it is clear that there are trends in management thinking, this fact does not allow us to believe that management concepts are without consequence. In fact, the consequences may be far-ranging and thorough, for example in terms of employment, quality of working life, or efficiency.

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[1]See, e.g., Hammer (1990), Hammer & Champy (1993), Davenport (1993). Slack et al. (1999) provides an overview of the relevant literature.

Clearly, organisations and organisational strategies are shaped by the different form of knowledge made use of by the people that are designing and redesigning companies and institutions. We need to know more about this.

Probably, the most studied exemplar of management theory is Scientific Management or Taylorism. Mainly, these studies have been concerned with the harmful effect of Taylorism on work and working conditions, but they have also shown the need to be careful not to take for granted that Scientific Management has a universal meaning and leading to the same kind of practice everywhere (Littler 1982). This indicates the need for similar comparative studies. Our paper aims at a modest contribution in this direction. How Norwegian is Norwegian BPR?

The reference to Taylorism could of course also be used to remind us that BPR has been criticised for being just a new version of Scientific Management (see Knights & Willmot 2000). Clearly, there are similarities, also in the potential effects on employment and intensification of work. In this sense, BPR belongs to a broad class of strategies that has developed historically in response to market-driven competition and workplace struggles over efficiency and autonomy.

Moreover, this suggests that BPR needs to understood as something more than a passing trend in management. Clearly, it was trendy, but it was also put to use. We have no complete picture of the impact of BPR in Norwegian industry, but available evidence suggestS that the majority of large companies have been strongly involved with reengineering projects over the last decade. This includes Norsk Hydro and Statoil, large financial organisations like Storebrand, major newspapers like Adresseavisen and Dagbladet, as well as the major public service organisations like Posten, the postal service, and Telenor, the Norwegian telecom.[2] This means that BPR has been picked up by the important industrial and financial locomotives of Norwegian economic life and pursued in a sustained and systematic way.

Thus, BPR was definitely important in Norway in the 1990s. This paper sets out to describe how and in what form BPR has been made available to Norwegian companies and managers.

In this process, consultants play an important role that has not been extensively studied. Czerniawska (1999:4) quotes *The Economist* (22 March 1997) where it was argued that "The management consultancy business is a tale of mystery and imagination. Nobody seems to know quite what it is, let alone whether it delivers value for money". We hope, through our study of the uptake of BPR in Norway, to provide some insight into the way consultants work and their role in the diffusion and transformation of business and organisational concepts and ideas. This also means that we will explore the relationship between consultancy and other uptake efforts, to see if the function together and to assess their relative importance.

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[2]See Dahlen (1995), Moen (1996) as well as our interviews with Norwegian consultants.

2. The dynamics of uptake

In this paper, we perceive BPR mainly as a cluster of concepts, methods, and ideas. This means that the uptake of BPR is about the uptake of knowledge. Thus, this may approached through the sociology of knowledge, which is concerned with the way knowledge is shaped, transformed and transmitted in different social settings.

It is commonly assumed that knowledge is an easily transferable commodity. In fact, this is a basic assumption of scientific communication. We write papers, they are reviewed, sometimes improved, then published and made part of the reservoir of knowledge available to other scientists in the field. On occasion, we experience "misunderstandings" that may trouble us, but generally we remain reassured that papers tell it all.

However, the system of scientific communication is more complicated than is implied here. While the sub-system of international journals is very important, it is insufficient. Papers are always open to flexible interpretation, and they do not convey all information needed to redo them - in fact, the whole process is bounded by the tacit dimension of science. Scientists know more than they may or are able to put into writing or even communicate orally (Polanyi 1967, Collins 1992). Moreover, the success or failure of a piece of knowledge is not determined by truth or failure, but by the perceived potential of that knowledge to provide interesting opportunities for colleagues or other parties. This means that the symbolic aspects of knowledge, its rhetorical qualities, have to be observed closely (Latour 1987). In fact, positive symbolic properties may play an important role in the promotion of particular theories or perspectives.

The implications of these features of the production and transfer of knowledge vary. The possibility of flexible interpretations does not mean that any interpretation is legitimate or will be performed. The tacit aspect of knowledge is in principle an important problem, but it should not be taken to imply that knowledge cannot be formulated or formalised. Transfer of knowledge should be studied as an empirical issue and as an instance of nuances in grey, rather than as principled stand in favour of one or the other of a dichotomous point of view.

The social sciences face some particular challenges related to the fact that this sort of knowledge has to be local, even if concepts and theories may have super-local existence. The point is that social scientists use general concepts and theories in the analysis of local phenomena, but these phenomena are not (or should not be) used to test theories or concepts. Rather, theories and concepts are used to make sense of local phenomena, sometimes also to provide methods of intervention.

This view is supported by a set of studies of the practice of technology studies in different European countries. They argue that what we see is "similar concerns, different styles" (Cronberg & Sørensen 1995, Sørensen 1999). Technology studies as a research field is being shaped by academic traditions and resources, policy concerns, and the availability of research support as well as by "international" bodies of theories and concepts. It is a fairly complex process,

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which results in a definite local imprint - technology studies are done differently in different countries - but also in a practice that is recognisable also as an international discourse.

We do have some studies and examples that show how management and action theories have been changed in the process of transfer. Craig Littler's (1982) study of the practice of Taylorism in Europe paints a picture of a quite diverse business of Scientific Management consultancy in the mid-war period. He claims that there was no common, well-defined understanding of Taylorism, even if there existed a substantial body of Scientific Management literature to guide the development of consultancy.

The transfer of sociotechnical theory from Tavistock Institute to the Norwegian Industrial Democracy project in the late 1950s and early 1960s could be seen as a counter-example. This transfer was carefully set up through a sustained professional collaboration. Norwegian social scientists, above all Einar Thorsrud, was trained at Tavistock, and several Tavistock researchers came to work for shorter or longer periods of time in Norway. Thus, the conditions for an uptake identical to the original body of knowledge were particularly favourable. Even so, the Norwegian version of sociotechnical field experiments appears as distinctly different along several dimensions from the classic experiments of Tavistock researchers.

Thus, we expect the uptake of BPR in Norway to be a mix of adoption and adaption. On the one hand, obviously, BPR has been brought in from the US, based on the original work of Hammer and Champy. This means, in principle, that academics and/or practitioners have put on the agenda the need to adopt these new ideas. On the other hand, there is the need to tailor general principles to local situations, which means that the new ideas also had to be adapted to the Norwegian context. The challenge then is to understand the relationship between adaption and adoption.

Perhaps, the most obvious way to analyse uptake is from the framework of communication theory. In that case, we construct a situation where there is a sender who encodes a message that is decoded by a receiver. Uptake is dependent upon the availability of a sender, the existence of a receiver, and the ability of the receiver to decode the encoded message. However, this is too simplistic, above all because the uptake is more than just communication. It is also about the development of practices among managers, consultants and academics.

Another common approach to such issues is the so-called diffusion model (see, e.g., Rogers 1995). This systems perspective is based on the assumption that there is a centre from which some artifact or piece of information is moved into locations that are recognised as peripherical. The concept of diffusion is metaphorical and originates from the kinetic theory of gases. The implication of this is by no means unimportant. When one thinks in terms of diffusion, it means that properties like energy, resistance, velocity, impetus, and collision come to mind. If we are concerned with BPR, the diffusion perspective means that we perceive of BPR as a defined entity that flows or is transported from one location (the US) to several others (e.g. Europe). Diffusion is measured in terms of uptake,

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typically represented by the S-curve and divided into stages: pioneer, growth, mature, decline, etc.

In his study of «management fashion», Abrahamson (1996) has proposed a model for the dissemination of management concepts that is related to the diffusion model. He argues that such dissemination should be understood as a relationship between supply, originating with what he calls management fashion setters, and demand by management fashion users. His group of fashion setters includes gurus, mass media organisations, consulting firms, and business schools. Their impact is in Abrahamson's model mediated by a context of sociopsychological and technoeconomic forces. These forces may produce demand because managers may need tools, concepts, or symbols to cope with or to appear to cope with recession, local problems or new technology. Also, demand may be the outcome of a need to stand out, to distinguish oneself compared to other managers.

To apply this management fashion model, one needs to make problematic assumptions about the theoretical stability of, e.g., BPR. Moreover, such assumptions tend to raise issues about definition and similar boundary work: «Is this really BPR»? Nevertheless, the model has other features that is interesting to pursue, in particular the dynamics of the management fashion setters. Abrahamson implies that such fashion setters would move from one trend to another. That means that the proponents of BPR would - at some point - move on to promote another, different trend. This would imply that BPR would be a passing interest among consultants and academics, a proposition that should be explored.

Abrahamson gives business schools a place in the fashion-setting dynamic, but their function is rather unclear from his account. Actor network theory (ANT) represents an alternative analytic framework where an academic centre would be assumed to play a pivotal role in developing and creating an interest in BPR (e.g., Latour 1987). ANT offers the added advantage of a focus on processes of translations, where a body of theory would undergo transformations in order to be adopted to a larger network of interest. Moreover, ANT suggests that we should be aware of the potential effect of academic institutions to provide authority and trustworthiness.

A related theoretical framework is the domestication model (Sørensen et al. 2000, Brosveet & Sørensen 2000). This model highlights the need for local development of symbolic meaning and practical use, as well as the potential importance of institutional structures and changes.

In the empirical analysis, we will challenge these theories by using them to define and explore the process of uptake. A critical issue in this respect is of course whether the nation state plays any role. The image of globalization suggests that uptake of a set of ideas like BPR takes place through intersecting arenas produced by academics and international consulting companies. Thus, it is particularly interesting to look at the role of the Norwegian academic community and the relationship between this community and consulting

companies in Norway. Has there been a Norwegian BPR scene, or has uptake been an affair of a globalized knowledge economy?

3. Method

This study is based on a mix of sources. The most important is a set of in-depth interviews. In addition, we have done an effort to survey Norwegian literature on BPR and related topics, and we have made use of Internet search tools to identify BPR activities, in particular in the academic area.

In total, we have done 20 interviews either face-to-face or by telephone. They lasted about 1-1 ½ hours. The telephone interviews was conducted by two of the authors through the use of a "group phone". We used this format for practical reasons to avoid extensive travelling. However, in most of these cases, at least one of the researchers knew the respondent and had talked to him previously. The other interviews took place face-to-face. The interviews were taped and transcribed.

Based on previous experience with BPR, a few strategic informants were selected to be interviewed as a start. To some extent we then followed a snowball method, since these informants would help us identify new ones. Consultancy companies are supposed to be difficult to get access to. However, in our case, this turned out not to be a problem. One consultancy company collaborated with our university, and that made access easier. In two other cases, our first inquiry were through acquaintances. But in general, we were able to get access to consultants that worked with BPR just by phoning the companies. Nevertheless, it is of course pertinent to ask to what we did get access to?

Consultants are difficult to interview and the interpretation of the information is by no means straightforward. For example, the interviews produce narratives about what consultants do, but no access to observe them. In what they say, we find many layers of meaning, and it is an exacting job to interpret them. Different motives, themes, images and narrative lines or grips are part of what they tell. This is of course about BPR, but by the way they tell about this they also tell about the meanings of BPR. Often when something is wrenched, exaggerated or silenced, the meaning is made more clear.

Interviewing about BPR is partly retrospective, and the interviews cover past events and different contexts. This information has to be interpreted critically and with care. But irrespective of the quality of the retrospective facts, the stories they tell are important indicators of the way the informants interpret BPR, and the way they want BPR to be understood today. A particular challenge is the changing context of interpretation. When we did our interviews, E-business had become a frontstage phenomenon to most of our informants. Many of them clearly saw BPR in the light of this development, which gave BPR a new or strengthened rationale. This is also something that may have been constructed through the dialogue of the interview. For example, one of our informants gave

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a talk a week after our interview where one of the Power Point slides had the title "From re-engineering to e-engineering".

The format in which the interviewed talk about BPR, is very important. By expressing stories many believe in and like to tell over and over again, by glorifying a person or actions or ways to act as an ideal, to be legendary, infamous or honourable, such narrative elements are an important basis on which to reconstruct the meaning of BPR and the context it is told in. Since we are part of an academic community that is part of our study, we need of course to carefully consider our own role in this. There is no privileged position from where a neutral account can be produced.

The quotes used in our account have been translated into English. This of course implies the risk that the original tone and emphasis is changed in the translation process.

A literature survey has been conducted, but it yielded a rather meagre result (see Brosveet 2000 for details). With the exception of one book (Willoch 1994) and a Norwegian translation of Hammer and Champy (1994), there is little that has been published. The use of standard computerised search techniques and available databases, has not identified much grey literature either,[3] although there is a number of students' theses. Of course, there is the difficulty that there has never been a unified translation of BPR into Norwegian, but we have used the main synonyms in our searches. Thus, the interviews are our main source.

However, in the analysis of academic efforts, we have supplemented the interviews through information downloaded from the home pages of the relevant institutions. Here we have also found reading lists. Since they consist mainly of non-Norwegian texts, that supports the lack of academic writing shown from the literature survey (Brosveet 2000).

The aim of this report is two-fold. It shall describe, quite concretely, what has been and is done with BPR in Norway: the channels of uptake, the actors' strategies, etc. Furthermore, by interpreting the narratives of the informants, we will try to analyse how BPR has been translated into the Norwegian situation. By translation we mean how BPR has been understood, how it has been practised, and the symbolic meaning of the concept.

With one notable exception, we have chosen to use anonymous quotes from the interviews. Academic informants are labelled A1 and A2 and consultants C1, C2, etc. This gives reference to the respective interview transcripts.

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[3]We have searched electronically in the major Norwegian newspapers after 1995. Before 1995, electronic searches are not possible. We may thus have missed the uptake in newspapers in the early period of BPR, but this would have meant small changes in our main argument about uptake.

4. The Norwegian context

Often, the analysis of context represents an effort to identify some rationale or hidden logic behind a set of actions. What follows here, is an effort to provide some information that may be relevant in the interpretation of the picture we portray of BPR in Norway. In addition, we have looked at the way our informants construct the context of BPR.

With a population of less than 4.5 mill., Norway is a small country. This means that networks tend to be small and easy to overview. The industry is dominated by oil & gas and other raw materials, like aluminium and fisheries, including fish farming. The marine sector is definitely a stronghold. The average size of companies is very small. However, the use of PCs, internet and mobile telephones is among the highest in the world.

Social democratic ideology has been hegemonic in the whole of the post 1945 period, but it has slightly eroded in the 1990s when social democracy has been squeezed by liberal ideas of market power. The medium high rate of unionisation has nevertheless kept up throughout the 1990s, and the unions are still very important as social partners. Moreover, industrial relations are characterised by a high level of trust and collaboration on the national level as well as on company level.

Like most countries in Western Europe, Norway is an affluent society. However, the exploration of oil and gas resources off its west coast has made Norway into the second largest oil producer in the world and less vulnerable to economic fluctuations in the world market than most other countries. Still, Norway experienced a severe recession from 1987 and into the early 1990s.

This recession could be assumed to provide a favourable climate to BPR. Several of our informants in the consulting companies confirm this impression. One relates this to the need for cost-cutting:

«(I)t was a kind of recession and people looked for ways to cut costs. And this was a new approach to cutting costs, you see, but still with the costumer as a focal point, so that hopefully, costs could be cut without harming costumers».

However, it should be noted that we prompted the thinking about a recession, and that the informant is defensive in the way of talking about cost cutting rather than reducing staff.

However, from the perspective of one of the most influential proponents of BPR in Norway, the emphasis on recession shaped the uptake of BPR in a harmful way:

«I think that, unfortunately, a lot of vicious rationalization was performed then, under the name of BPR. (...) In this manner, the recession reinforced an interpretation of the concept that was NOT intended».

However, this problem was probably more strongly related to the use of BPR in the US than in Norway:

> "What he (Hammer) tried to do, was to keep a kind of orthodoxy concerning the concept of reengineering. And ... a certain period unfortunately it was misinterpreted by many people to become ... brutal slaughtering .... while the main message in reengineering is how to do more out of the resources you already have"

Thus, the importance of the recession in Norway is by no means clear. A slightly different interpretation is given by an informant that told us that:

> «There was a recession back in 1990 ... in great parts of the world. And this (BPR) was probably a response to this, that you had seen that one had made huge investments in IT in many companies, but without much commercial profit. The production lines was often improved, but when you looked at the number of people employed, as white collar workers, little gain had been made. You see, they had invested a lot in PCs and infrastructure and all that, but there wasn't much dynamic ... or savings in that area».

Also, in an article from 1994 about BPR in Norway, printed in one of the leading Norwegian business journals, there is little talk about neither recession nor IT investments. Based on an interview with a prominent consultant in McKinsey as well as a couple of academics, the conclusion is that BPR

> «encompasses so much of really basic issues and techniques from accounting, strategy and organisation theory that it would be embarrassing if your company is not doing something like this already».[4]

Another large Norwegian consulting company states in a leaflet about BPR from the same year that «The 1990s is the decade of re-organization».[5] BPR is promoted, not as a response to recession, but rather to cope with radical changes in the world market.

While recession may have contributed to the initial BPR interest, it seems clear that in the long run BPR depended more strongly on extensive investments in information and communications technology (ICT). In fact, the Norwegian reception of BPR seems to be shaped by this and the widespread optimistic view that ICT was the way to the future. At least in the academic community, there has been a more sustained interest in BPR within computer science and administrative computing than in engineering or management. One of the first major introductions of BPR was the conference *Infotech 93*, which was organised by the

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[4]*Kapital* no 14, 1994, p. 64.

[5]*'Forandring mot det mye bedre'. Hvordan gjennomføre forbedringsprosesser med radikale forbedringsmål eller BUSINESS PROCESS REENGINEERING*, Temahefte no 27, Oslo: ISI, 1994, p. 1.

Norwegian computer society.[6] Moreover, many of the larger consulting companies interested in BPR are engaged in ICT systems as well.

A small survey of the motives of Norwegian companies to apply BPR (Moen 1996) concluded that:

- BPR projects are initiated through external impacts, in particular by demand to reduce lead-times, cost-cutting and increased competition.
- Top management take the initiative
- Main objectives are reduction of costs, reduction of lead-times, improved quality and/or improved service.
- ICT is a catalyst for BPR.

The latter point may be related to the general concern about the need to utilise ICT that emerged in the latter half of the 1980s, to be reinforced in the 1990s. To invest in ICT was the order of the day, but many companies experienced that such investments gave no guarantee of profitability. This would make them receptive to management strategies that promised to help them realize the potential of these investments. Most of the - admittedly small - Norwegian literature on BPR emphasise the importance of ICT in relation to BPR projects (see, e.g., Willoch 1994: 35f). This is also in accordance with Hammer (1990).

Our study suggests that there are the following main channels of BPR uptake in Norway:

- Spokesperson[7]
- Consultants
- Literature & Seminars
- Academic communities
- IT-analysts & IT suppliers.

Since most of these channels were anticipated before we started our investigation, the list in itself was not very surprising. Rather, the exciting aspects are related to their relative importance and their internal dynamics. Probably, it is in this way we may trace what - eventually - may turn out to be specific to the Norwegian uptake.

However, given the usual concerns in discussions of context, there is something missing from the list. Most notably, neither technology policy nor industrial policy plays any significant role. This potential channel is thus left out. The Norwegian government never engaged in such concrete business strategies, and there is no trace of BPR and that type of strategic thinking in any major white paper or similar government document. According to our findings, the situation is the same with trade unions and national business associations. Even the Norwegian research councils did not directly engage to support BPR-related

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[6]*Infotech 93: Business process reengineering*, 9 November 1993, Oslo: Den Norske Dataforening.

[7]We prefer the more neutral concept of spokesperson to the more colourful "guru", since the latter may be interpreted in a negative way.

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R&D, although they may have supported some individual projects.[8] The closest we came to trace any such BPR network was an organization named Norwegian network on IT, Organisation and Leadership (ITOS). This was established in 1993, as a a network of some research and development communities and companies that was interested in the relationship between organisational development (OD) and IT, especially public or semi-public companies like the Postal Office and the «Bankenes Betalingssentral». One of the research councils supported the intiative with a small grant. ITOS organised a conference, but in the end little came out of the network. Thus, in general, we have found no evidence to suggest that BPR was made into a real concern of industrial or technology policy communities.

The main impression from the available material, above all from our interviews, is thus that BPR entered Norway piggy-backing new information technology. The considerable investments made by most Norwegian companies as well as the generally widespread use of home PCs and mobile phones seem to be a very important motivating factors to promote BPR. We will explore this further in the next sections where we will investigate the main channels of uptake.

In addition, the introduction and dissemination of BPR was probably facilitated by a kind of information technology ideology or discourse that emerged in the late 1980s. This discourse was based on the idea that IT represented the future and the most important way of approaching business challenges and opportunities, as well as the challenges of the public sector. The strong inherent optimism on behalf of IT and IT-related applications (see Buland 1996) could be seen to resonate well with the kind of rhetoric found in orthodox BPR (e.g. Hammer 1990), with its emphasis on the need for radical change and the use of concepts like re-engineering and process.

5. How the word gets around: the importance of a spokesperson

Abrahamson's management fashion model as well as actor network theory would make us expect that the initial efforts to bring BPR to Norway was related to academic activities. Clearly, some academics quite early got interested in BPR and played a role in the promotion of the ideas, but the concept never spurred a lot of academic interests or sustained efforts of elaboration through research, outside a few individual efforts. Thus, the main channel of BPR in Norway was a consultant named Bjørn-Erik Willoch. He managed to establish himself as a kind of BPR spokesperson, not just in Norway, but even in Sweden and to some extent also in Denmark. Thus, he exercised considerable influence. We will start out by a closer examination of Willoch's activities.

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[8]This is based on an interview with a well-placed informant in the Norwegian research council. All important Norwegian government policy documents have been made available on the searchable web-page «Odin» ((http://www.odin.no) We tried a lot of relevant searchwords to explore any interest in BPR, but the result was negative.

When we interviewed Willoch in February 2000, he was working as a partner in Ernst & Young in Stockholm. The following account is mainly based on this information, but with supplements from written sources and the other interviews. We have chosen to analyse Willoch in some detail, because he has been instrumental in shaping the Norwegian reception of BPR.

Willoch graduated as Master of electrical engineering at the Norwegian Institute of Technology (today, Norwegian University of Science and Technology) in Trondheim in 1984. His first job was with the oil company Esso. In 1987, he became employed by Enator, which at the time bought a big consultancy company in Norway named ISI. This was the start of his career as a consultant.

Quite early, in 1988, when he visited the US to participate in a seminar on IT strategies, he was introduced to the concept of Business Process Reengineering. It was a public, commercial seminar held at Hotel Merriott in Boston. A guy named Michael Hammer gave a speech. This was prior to the publishing of Hammer's famous article "Don't automate, obliterate", and thus before the concept was very well known. Willoch described his first introduction to the concept as a kind of religious salvation.

> "He (Hammer) gave a lecture there that was completely striking. It dawned on me! ... I took the message. It is a very simple message on which to base persuasion. Within traditional hierarchical thinking, it does not function - the functional division of the hierarchy is not the way to approach customers, and Michael Hammer could present this in a way that was appealing to me also, very spiritual, very funny and ... life-giving. A lot of examples. And it, it was – it just said pling!"

In his own terms, this was a kind of conversion. Willoch makes a point that he is the son of a Norwegian missionary, a preacher that has done a lot of missionary work. They lived abroad about 10 years. But, in fact, other consultants we interviewed also talked about the first meeting with BPR as a kind of personal turning point. For example, one of our academic informants (A1), a consultant with a PhD in information science on BPR, describes his first meeting with the concept as a kind of "love at the first glance". Thus, there must have been a strong rhetorical quality to the early presentations of this new management concept.

Willoch returned to Hammer's seminars once or twice a year to learn more from him. It was not a collaboration. Willoch told us that Hammer never was interested in Europe as a market, and that he does not understand Europeans. But Willoch thought he was able to understand Americans, he says, since he had lived together with them for 10 years. Thus, he thought he should be able to translate BPR from its US context to Scandinavia. He participated in Hammer's seminar as long as he felt he got something, after that he stopped to go. There was no copyright in the idea or the concept, so in that sense Willoch got the Scandinavian market for free. He commented that Hammer never got as much out of the concept as he could have, but as long as he gets $ 100.000 for a lecture, he is probably satisfied.

In 1992 he started his own company. However, during the previous four years he had been employed as a consultant, he had suceeded in creating a name for himself connected to BPR. Morever, he had got an enormous response from the external market in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland.

In this situation, he decided to write on a book on BPR after Lars Wallström in the magazine Corporate Computing had challenged him to do it. The result was a book in Norwegian called "Business Process Reengineering – a practical introduction and guidance" (Willoch 1994). Up till now, he has sold 12 000 copies, 4 000 in Norway and 8 000 in Sweden, which is quite a lot for such a book. These numbers clearly indicate that it has been used also as course literature by academic institutions and seminars. Also Hammer's original book was translated into Norwegian at the same time. The first printing sold out, but it was never reprinted.

Willoch has lectured extensively and participated in many seminars about BPR, so this is probably even more important to the dissemination of the concept than the book. During our interview, he made a quick calculation that in the period between 1990 and 1998, his total audience would add up to something in the order of at least 100.000 people. He gave at least two talks per week, with approximately 100 people (often, the sessions were larger), 40 weeks a year in 8 years. In addition, he had internal presentations in order to teach customers, and he gave some lectures to Norwegian students in business administration and marketing. Given the relative small community of potential participants in seminars like this, the number is very impressing, and Willoch told us that he was very satisfied.

In the three years between 1992 to 1995, he worked alone in his company and experienced great popularity. A major contribution was in the way he paved the ground for and coached other consultancy companies as well as pressuring customers to be concerned with BPR-ish issues. In that way, he got the possibility to work in a lot of different industries like steel manufacturing, pulp and paper, cars, insurance, banking, and auditing, without actually knowing how to do it, but learning by doing.

> "To be honest, when this was on top ten as a novelty and journalists
> phoned many times a week and there was articles all over ... we ...
> we didn't know much! ... At that time it got a lot of attention, but
> now as we really know what we are doing, nobody wants to talk
> about it anymore. It's quite fascinating".

In his account, BPR is a concept that came some years too early. With a better knowledge base and more practical experience, it would have been easier to make it work.

When asked to elaborate his views about the problems of implementing BPR, Willoch wanted to distinguish between what he called short-term and long-term processes. Long-term processes are usually found in heavy industries, like steel mills, pulp and paper, and the construction of heavy machinery, and they met with difficulties. The greatest successes was found in the service sector, like banks, insurance companies and travel agencies. Here, things happened fast, and

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there is a big volume. If you reduce task time with 80%, that makes a big difference in terms of profit. One example is the income tax in Norway where the forms are filled in automatically by computers, and there is only individual control of the information. Another Norwegian example is the metering of the energy consumption and the calculation of the bill. Earlier, representatives from the power utility visited every household, but now registration is based on self reporting.

Of course, another reason why BPR could have more success today than in the previous decade is the development of internet technologies. This development, says Willoch, is definitely enabling BPR, as we see in the case of so-called e-business.

One of the consultancy companies with which Willoch used to collaborate was Ernst & Young. In 1995, he was invited to become a partner. At that time they were 15 people, in addition to those employed in their auditing business in Stockholm. During the next five years, they expanded a lot by utilising BPR as their product. Now they count 250 persons. Recently, CAP Gemini has acquired Ernst & Young, and they will thus be one of the largest companies doing BPR consulting.

It should be emphasized that Willoch's role as a kind of BPR spokesperson does not imply that he is engaged in any form of exegesis of Hammer and so-called orthodox BPR. In fact, as should be evident from the account above, he is pragmatically oriented and has considerable rhetorical skills. This means that Willoch has performed a kind of translation of BPR that we need to analyse more closely.

In the interview, he said that his main contribution to the concept of BPR was to have added a more "Scandinavian view" on what features that needs to be changed. There is "the soft dimension in this, what are the consequences of process thinking for the individual". In his book, these views are hard to find. However, interestingly enough, Willoch like many of the other consultants we interviewed, retells some standard stories that contrasts American and Scandinavian working life, the tough hardship versus the softer, collaborative concern.

«In the States, you can demand a change, but in Scandinavia you can't demand a change, you have to make it attractive so that the employees want to do it».

But at the end of the day, successful processes are evaluated in terms of time, money and quality.

In Willoch's practice, BPR has changed from the radical approach found in the original formulation of the concept, to a more stepwise approach. He mentions as an example an insurance company where consultants have returned about twenty times, to do reengineering step by step.

«The point is that the effect of being new is gone, but BPR has become a craft, and that is good».

Another type of translation seems to be related to the fact that Willoch, like many other BPR consultants, used to work with logistical problems. It might be that the

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holistic system approach that BPR represents, with a strong focus on processes of movement of goods, materials and information, is particularly attractive to people with a logistical mindset. From this point of view, a company is built around a set of logistical processes. To make the company more efficient, these processes need to be more rational. Reengineering promises to do that, and in a way that makes logistics even more important after changes have been implemented.

In Willoch's own words:

«And it (BPR) is also physical logistics. And it is - in logistics it is obvious that the flows move across, and that they do function terribly bad. And that leads to a delay for the whole industry. (He makes an internal concrete example.) I worked a lot on logistics, and it was very easy to test the message (of BPR) on logistics. Physical parameters like time, storage, are easily available and understandable for logistics. So the message was easy to sell. It was there the concept developed. It went from being physical logistics to becoming a discussion about processes also in other industries like the service sector, that means all sectors that have intensive transactions.»

The concept of process is considered quite tricky. Willoch states, matter of fact, that it is to be understood as a physical flow of goods or a flow of office procedures like customers' transaction with banks and insurance companies. (For instance, how long does it take you to phone an insurance company to tell them that your bike has been stolen and until you have a new bike?). The concept of process that is promoted in this manner is clearly mechanistic. It is about physical entities and procedures, not about the social nature of work. Social relations become interesting only in the implementation stage. His book clearly confirms this impression (Willoch 1994).

Compared to Hammer & Champy (1993), Willoch's book has a greater emphasis on method. Hammer & Champy's account is rather abstract and general, so a lot of people struggled hard trying to do BPR on their own.

«Everybody fumbled. Nobody knew exactly how this should be done. I had written a book, and I had a certain idea about how to do it, but it wasn't a method - it was a procedure. But it – people really tried – tried and tried and tried. And gradually we learned».

Willoch's success, and maybe also the success of introducing BPR in Norway, was due to his ability to provide good examples and to account them in an entertaining and convincing way. His narratives made BPR look more concrete, more doable. This is emphasized by his use of metaphors and figures. An example of this is his claim that 80 per cent of the activity in companies are producing nothing but "heat", only 20 per cent is value adding work. That is the mission of BPR - to work smarter.

In the interview, he emphasized that says things they preached earlier, like production tailored to customers, the customer approach, finally is really possible to do. Previously, they were not even close to do such things. Customer

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satisfaction is today the core content of the BPR concept, he argues. Although he admits that one has mixed a lot of features into it. Customer satisfaction is even more important than the process thinking. But, as he says, «a process is a workflow that starts with the needs of the customer, and solves it. All other functions are far less important».

Nevertheless, he has to admit that BPR has had a wide scope and an great ability to include a lot of issues, due to its open definition:

«The concept of BPR did consist of a lot of things. Yes, it became
– one did throw a lot of things into that pot. It is like this – the hot
concepts attract a lot of things. But what the whole thing is about
is to make a company to start from the needs of a customer».

But clearly it is an advantage to be flexible, when this bring in the crowds.

When we read Willoch in the light of Abrahamson's management fashion model, his accounts makes the idea of a fashion setting community somewhat problematic. As the Scandinavian BPR spokesperson, Willoch has clearly been a fashion setter. At the same time, he has remained quite fidel. Even today, BPR is his concept, the basis of his professional identity, although he makes a sustained effort to update it. Willoch was a setter of one fashion only, and he does not move on to new concepts.

Arguably, Willoch has made a great effort to domesticate BPR in the Norwegian setting by developing practical procedures as well as symbolic meaning. In this manner, he has helped to transform or translate the concept, but his contribution goes beyond that. Translation is not enough. A channel of BPR uptake needs to provide a practical and symbolic embedding. Willoch - the spokesperson - clearly did this, but not entirely on his own. Two communities - or channels - need to be considered in this respect, the academics and the consultants.

6. The academic channel

With a few exceptions, Norwegian academics have not contributed to the research literature nor to the popular literature on BPR (Brosveet 2000). This is a clear indication that there has been little research performed in Norway to develop or even criticise BPR. However, it does not mean that there has been no academic uptake. Rather, this uptake has been more closely related to teaching than to research. Both Norwegian business schools as well as the main universities in Norway have made BPR a part of their teaching:
- The Norwegian School of Management
- The Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration.
- Norwegian University of Science and Technology
- The universities of Bergen and Oslo (mainly through their computer science departments).

What kind of uptake has taken place? What has been the role of university teaching in disseminating BPR?

The Norwegian School of Management (Handelshøyskolen BI) offers programmes in Business Administration. Among the Norwegian institutions of higher education, BI is the one that has been most strongly engaged in BPR by offering their own BPR subject since 1995, called Business Process Change Management. Davenport's *Process Innovation* (1993) is the major text on the reading list, in addition to a number of articles on BPR, in English. About 40 students a year takes the subject, which is specially designed for candidates specializing in "Information management".

BI also teaches BPR in a special seminar named "Business Process Management". Here, they introduce Hammer & Champy, but also other texts. They teach this seminar in collaboration with Ernst & Young Management Consulting. This is supposed to be a refresher subject for managers and consultants that do concrete change projects and study part-time. BI also offers a Master of Management programme, where one may specialize in logistics. BPR is a part of the teaching about time reduction. As part of a third programme, BI offers a subject where BPR is presented as a part of analysing economical processes and value chains in companies. In ongoing student thesis work, different cases of e-commerce is used to exemplify the new use or development of BPR.

The other major business school in Norway, Norwegian School of Economics and Business administration (NHH) in Bergen has also been teaching BPR in courses related to strategic management. However, the impact of BPR seems to have been less than at BI. At the University of Bergen, BPR has been touched upon in some courses in computer and information science, but only in a marginal way. The situation at the University of Oslo is similar. BPR has been talked about in computer science courses, but it has not received explicit focus. However, several computer science students at the universities have written master theses about BPR and topics related to reengineering.

At Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, a research programme named PAKT (Program on Applied Coordination Science) was established in 1993. It was funded mainly by Statoil and Telenor. The concept was taken from Tom Malone and his Institute of Coordination Science at MIT. PAKT should contribute to the solution of new problems or challenges that came from the utilization of new ICT and new ways to work. BPR became one of the objects of study in the programme, in particular since Statoil started to introduce the concept.

The previously mentioned network ITOS was also a part of the efforts at NTNU. However, this university never gave BPR courses, but BPR and related issues was covered in master programmes in industrial economics and in production planning. Also, a few students' theses approached BPR topics. The focus at NTNU has remained with organizational development and, until recently, sociotechnical system design (STSD), including industrial democracy. However, BPR was more central in the refresher courses within management and leadership.

There have been research projects concerned with BPR at all the above-mentioned institutions. Willoch's re-interpretation of Hammer and Davenport (see above) has had little impact here, although there are a couple of examples from NTNU that can be cited as attempts to integrate BPR with other engineering methods such as the TQM-like Production Control Method (PCM)[9] and self-assessment techniques.[10] Jon Iden (1995) is still probably the only one to have written a PhD-dissertation about BPR. This work was done at the University of Bergen at the Department of Information Science. Iden describes his work as being a broad analysis of the relationship between BPR and information technology. He sets about to provide a framework for choosing a suitable modelling technique as well as evaluating some common assumptions about the role of information technology in the BPR literature. In doing so he redefines BPR in a local context and provides a link to models and techniques of systems analysis already existing within computer science (for more details, see Brosveet 2000).

According to our academic informants, A1 and A2, some people at NHH have been doing research on BPR. Today, this research is mainly directed towards the exploration of e-business. A1 as well as A2 have a US network that - at least partly - has inspired their interest in BPR. This network is related to social informatics (professor Rob Kling etc.) and not to the orthodox sources of BPR, like Hammer or Davenport.

This research effort has mainly, as far as we can see, served to support educational efforts. A1 and A2 reports being involved in some consulting activities and in teaching courses targeted at practitioners. BPR has been very marginal as a research concern in most of the communities that could have been expected to investigate and explore the phenomenon. This also means that there has been very little critical engagement in BPR, for example in industrial sociology or work life research. Berit Moltu's dissertation work, which originated from the PAKT centre at NTNU, seems to be the only exception (see Moltu 1999).

When we take a close look at Iden's dissertation as well as the master theses concerned with BPR, they suggest that the academic uptake of BPR in Norway mainly represented an interpretation from computer science and management information systems. This means that BPR was given a technology-driven bias, but also that computer science methods were given a major role in BPR methodology (Brosveet 2000).

One may observe a difference between this way of appropriating BPR and the interpretation found in Willoch (1994). The latter emphasizes, as previously observed, systems analysis and a logistical mode of thinking. The resulting methodology is different, but the emphasis on information technology as the primary enabler of BPR is central to both interpretations.

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[9]Strandhagen & Skarlo (1995).

[10]Rolstadås (1995).

The implication of this may not be obvious, but BPR could in principle have been appropriated also as a methodology of organization development. Probably, IT would still have been perceived as very important, but the resulting approach to the changing of organizations would have been quite different. However, the academic communities concerned with organization development showed little interest in BPR. Rather, BPR meant that computer science and systems engineering communities became more concerned with organization development. The result was that BPR came to mean IT with organization development, rather than organizational development with IT. In fact, one may argue that BPR has been instrumental in the development of a field of "OD with IT".

An interesting observation of the teaching uptake of BPR in universities is that most institutions adapt BPR to already existing fields or topics, like the value chain, change management and logistics in the business administration institutions, a systems development approach and focus on work flow analysis in the computer science departments, and organisational development at NTNU. This emphasizes the wide scope of BPR and the open nature of its definition, which make BPR fit in many contexts.

Arguably, the teaching uptake of BPR may have provided academic legitimation and trustworthiness. However, this effect is difficult to assess from our material.

7. Creating a BPR audience

It is difficult to estimate the impact of the teaching efforts of Norwegian academic institutions in terms of making BPR known to a broader audience of managers, consultants and the public. Probably, they helped to make the concept known, similar to many other management concept. However, these institutions did not provide any significant mass of people trained in BPR methodology, nor did they create a sustained interest in the phenomenon.

According to our informants, Norwegian newspapers wrote quite a lot about BPR in the early 1990s. However, judging from our own search efforts, business and engineering journals in Norway did not show much interest. Our informants say that the most important written source of information about BPR was Hammer's article in the Harward Business Review «Don't automate, obliterate». Besides that, as previously noted, many read Bjørn Erik Willoch (1994) and the Norwegian translation of Hammmer & Champy's *Reengineering the corporation*.

Another channel of uptake, probably more significant, was the seminars and courses given about BPR. The first major effort took place as a part of a larger conference, *InfoTech 93*, organized by The Norwegian Computer Association (DND). In this seminar, the connection between BPR and IT was focussed, and they addressed people working in marketing, distribution and logistics, in addition to the IT-community. Some early Norwegian cases was

presented from Norsk Hydro and the consulting company ISI A/S. In addition, one had invited speakers from AT&T Bell Laboratories and Rank Xerox.

After this seminar, a BPR group was started in Bergen, as part of DND. According to A1, a lot of people were interested in this group, but most of them «came, saw and went».

DND as the main association for computer professionals in Norway, is also the most important organizer of seminars and courses for professional updating and continuing education. Among larger arrangements, we find a three day BPR seminar with the BPR spokesperson Bjørn Erik Willoch in collaboration with ITOS in April 1995. Here, the oil companies STATOIL and BP, the Norwegian Internal Revenue Service (Skattedirektoratet) and ABB Financial services provided practical examples about the use of BPR. Willoch himself also talked about experiences from IKEA and the Norwegian Cooperative Association (NKL). A researcher from the Worklife Research Institute (AFI) in Oslo argued, from a sociotechnical point of view, that the Norwegian industrial context was favourable to BPR, due to traditions of social equality and a high degree of trust among industrial partners with long traditions for collaboration.

A1 organised as late as in April 1999 a two day BPR course under the auspices of DND. This course emphasized work flow analysis and other systems development techniques.

As previously mentioned, Willoch gave a lot of talks and seminars about BPR. In 1995, he established «BPR Norden, Institute for change management» in collaboration with Ernst & Young. This initiative, which was based paid membership, was marketed as a combination of the experiences of the globally based consulting company and the Nordic experiences of Willoch. «BPR Norden» was supposed to have activities like licencing special BPR methods, courses and seminars, to do research and development, to be a node in a BPR network, and to establish an archive of the most relevant literature, to be mediated through a newsletter to members.

The impression we get from our sources, is that the concept of BPR became pretty well known - at least in professional circles - in the first half of the 1990s. The fact that most of the large Norwegian companies undertook BPR projects in this period supports this view. While seminars, books, and articles as well as university teaching helped to diffuse the concept, there is little doubt that at the end of the day, consultants was the most important channel of a more detailed understanding and experience of BPR. This should be evident from our discussion of the activities of the spokesperson Willoch, but we will now turn to a more thorough analysis of the role of consultants and consulting companies.

8. The name is dead, but the process lives on. BPR in the hands of the consultants

In Norway, it is common to talk about «The big five» consultancy companies. However, which companies are included in this group varies, according to whom

you talk. The ones normally mentioned in this category included Price Waterhouse Coopers, Ernst & Young, Cap Gemini, Anderson Consulting, McKinsey, Deloitte & Touche and KPMG. They share the feature of being international, most of them with their main office in the US. Norwegian companies tend be smaller.

All companies belonging to «the big five» have BPR-like concepts as part of their portfolios. However, since BPR at a certain time got a negative connotation, none of them label openly what they do as BPR. For instance, Anderson Consulting in the early 1990es named their BPR version «value driven reengineering», later changed to «Business integration», which they say focus on «the holistic organisation». This differentiation in terms of names provides distinction. The companies look different, even if they use similar approaches.

Thus, despite the variation in names, there are striking similarities in the elements of the concepts, most of which we know from the BPR literature. As one of our consultant informants said:

«I started as a consultant in this field in –95, and myself, I have never used the word BPR when I have 'sold in' these ideas. It has more been a description of the project we have done». (C1)

This finding is similar to the results of Iden (1995), where he interviewed 12 BPR consultants and found that only a few used BPR as a label. The different varieties of BPR concepts are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. BPR concepts in «the big five» consulting companies.

Company	Ernst & young	Cap Gemini	Anderson consulting	Deloitte & Touche	Mc Kinsey	PwC	KPMG
BPR concept	Business Process Innovation	Process Development	Business Integration Value driven reengineering (early –90)	Enterprise transformation Process improvement BPR	Core Process redesign	Enterprise Wide Performance Improvement	BPT Business Performance Integration

The main argument is that even if BPR is dead, the «process» is still alive:

«They don't say they will do a BPR project, they translate it to something more internal, like this is our improvement programme, or our quality programme, or they used slogans like 'we will improve'. (...). The concept of BPR is not so much used or alive today, but the concept of process, the process understanding, or the idea that you can organize according to processes, that it is useful, that idea lives on.» (A1)

The smaller, Norwegian consulting companies do BPR-like projects to a varying degree. Some of them told that they would have liked to do BPR, but that they had not been trusted to do such projects because they were considered too small.

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This points to the important feature of many Norwegian BPR projects; their tendency to become very large, employing many consultants and lasting a long time. In part, this is also due to sustained engagement in time-consuming efforts to map work processes.

Other companies do BPR, but without being conscious of it. Usually, that means that they have specialised in SAP projects. Such companies have a pragmatic relationship to whether they do BPR or not, or even what kind of method they are using. But there are also smaller companies that claim to do BPR projects.

Many of our informants mentioned the Gartner group as an interesting actor concerned with BPR in Norway. This company analyses the development of the IT situation in Norway as well as in many other companies, and also on a global scale. The Gartner group does not do consulting, but acts as an advisor regarding challenges related to the use of information and communication technology is concerned. They do not provide specific analysis for individual customers. Customers get access to their information through membership. They may contact the Gartner group through their support desk, where the customer can talk to an analyst, or through their published reports.

The issues of the reports are supposed to be «customer driven». When many customers have asked the same question several times, they may decide to make an analysis on this issue. Publications are then distributed to their members. Once or twice a month one or two analysts from the US are invited to Norway to give a talk with the latest news about a current issue to a meeting to which members are invited.

Issues that are analysed range from practical concerns about how to negotiate a contract with Microsoft about Windows 2000 to more strategical perspectives like how to organize IT in a company, how to get the link to business, questions concerning how to be able to recruit and keep people, and what kind of resources they are going to need in the future, e.g. «Now we need to get away from this old COBOL stuff and do something new». They also advise about which consultancy companies to use.

The Gartner group aims to be a connection between end users like the big companies Hydro and Statoil on the one hand, and the suppliers or vendors of IT on the other. They obtain their information from both sources. In Norway, there are a few other companies in the same business - Metagroup, Gigagroup and Forester. One informant made the point that there might be «relations» between consultancy companies and IT suppliers. Some consultancy companies own shares in software companies. When they «help» customers to choose the right system, they might have a hidden agenda (C2). The Gartner group aims to get vendors and customers to understand new concepts, e.g. both groups read about e-commerce, and both groups ask what does this means to me? Their mission is to inform about possibilities and threats, and to advice companies about strategies to exploit new options. They aim to be more neutral than IT suppliers and to put the issues into perspective.

The Gartner group has about 1000 employees worldwide, and the main bulk of their activities is said to be globally oriented. The problems are supposed to be the same wether you are in Norway, Sweden or the UK. If you are going to implement SAP in Norway or in Ireland, they argue that you need the same profile on people and you are supposed to struggle with the same kind of problems. This has also been the case of BPR. The reports on this issue during 1995-96-97 were not made in Norway nor for the Norwegian market in particular.

C2 told us that back in 1995-96, many of Gartner group's customers started to ask about BPR: how do we use it, how much would it cost, how long time does it take to implement, and who should we engage if we need some help? The resulting analysis was not the kind that tells: «This is BPR», but rather a study of BPR related to IT, telecom systems and functions. The Gartner group produced short reports, 3-4 pages, as well as in-depth studies of 30-40 pages. They give probabilities for things to happen, so-called strategic assumptions planning. 80 percent means that they are pretty sure, and 90 per cent means that they have bet their job on this outcome:

«We try to find out which tools that exist that support a BPR project. Then different vendors are picked and classified after the ability to be visionary, the ability to execute»

The Gartner group mentions Anderson consulting as the company best known for doing BPR projects.

9. BPR according to Norwegian consultants

In table 1 in the former section, we saw how different consulting companies constructed different labels for the same phenomenon - BPR. However, it remained unclear to what extent their understanding in practice differed from «orthodoxy». The previous analysis of the spokesperson and the academic community suggested that the Norwegian uptake implied some transformations, but they remained ambiguous. There is no clear-cut translation from orthodox BPR to Norwegian BPR, partly because actors disagree about the nature of the translation, but above all because ambiguity appears to be an advantage (Moltu 2000). In this way, BPR appears as the proverbial potato, which can be used as a part of many dishes.

When we analyse the information given by our informants from consulting, this ambiguity does not disappear. In fact, there are important contradictions in the views presented about BPR. We will explore this through the following set of issues:

- a change from non-continuous thinking, related to the idea in orthodox BPR that this represent a fundamentally new approach, to an emphasis on continuity. Related to this is the replacement of the idea of radical change by continuous reform.
- the degree of hierarchical control of change and the issue of employee participation

- BPR as an exotic or trivial idea
- the malleability of BPR.

BPR – as Hammer's argument went – was interesting exactly because it freed itself from the restricting momentum of obsolete thinking. In fact, it represented a fundamentally new mode of thought. There are, of course, good reasons to emphasize the novel nature of any new concept. They have to struggle to make themselves visible, to stand out compared to their "competitors". Thus, there is a strong incentive to highlight the non-continuous aspects. Hence, it makes perfectly good sense for BPR to present itself as a refreshingly new mode of thinking. But intentions may very well fail to carry over to practise. How successful, then, was the attempts to present BPR as something unique?

When Hammer initially launched and outlined the basic ideas of BPR, he strongly emphasized the radicalness of the concept. Not because it was new, but because it offered possibilities to companies to rethink their situation and their strategies of change. But later, he changed his rhetorical strategy:

> «Originally, I felt that the most important word in the definition was 'radical'. The clean sheet of paper, the breaking of assumptions, the throw-it-all-out-and-start-again flavor of reengineering - this was what I felt distinguished it from other business improvement programs. This also turned out to be the aspect of reengineering that captured and excited the imagination of managers around the world. I have now come to realize that I was wrong, that the radical character of reengineering, however important and exciting, is not its most significant aspect. The key word in the definition of reengineering is 'process': a complete end-to-end set of activities that together create value for a customer» (Hammer, 1996:xii).

The translation that has been going on, is from understanding BPR as a radical break to perceive the concept as an expression of process organization. The very same translation comes through very clearly in the interviews. It is nicely captured by one of the academic proponents in the following statement:

> «BPR is dead. Long live the process!» (C3)

Several of our informants downplayed the radical nature of the BPR concept. In fact, they emphasized a strong analytic continuity with earlier – and later – efforts. What, then, is the content of the continuity in this historical development? The heart of the matter seems to be notion of a 'process' that, basically, is an expression of a break with functional or hierarchical organisation:

> «The process thinking, the essence of BPR, has evolved gradually over the years, each time expanding its scope. Hence, originally it focussed on logistics and production processes in the shape of CIM [computer integrated manufacturing] before expanding to the whole organisation in the form of BPR, and ending up with incorporating also the external customers in the shape of e-business". (C4)

The traces of this goes back to long before Hammer, perhaps most clearly to Michael Porter's notion of a value chain:

«Our basis is the value chain ... which consists of the various main tasks of the company, then we decompose these into deliverables ... . We use brown wall paper and draw the process from A to Z. Then, what often happens, is that they recognise how the work should have been done ... while today the company operates with airtight compartments. This is still the case in Norwegian industry. The companies have realised what a 'process' is – but have yet to organise according to it ... . Very few dare to try» (C5)

However, similar ideas may be found in sosiotechnical design (Mumford 1995, Moltu 2000).

In the steady flow of concepts, the urge to break away from functional organisation cuts across and represents continuity. According to Willoch, BPR places itself as an alternative to Adam Smith and hierarchy (see section 4). In this respect, BPR has a lot in common with many management concepts of the last two decades, which has claimed to circumvent the dysfunctions of Taylorism (see Skorstad 1999). As pointed out by one of our informants, the idea is also found in and ISO quality certification of the 1980s but the difference was that then the concept was too narrow, it was «very internally oriented, the customer was absent» (H). However, this might view may represent TQM in practice, because the theoretical definition of TQM has an explisit focus on customer (Oakland 1994).

Keeping the history or the continuity of ideas in mind also fosters skepticism towards the wave of management fads:

«When you start giving ideas names, they suddenly become so incredibly fantastic. But if you scratch below the surface, it's really always about improvement». (C6)

A concrete manifestation of the large element of continuity across the different concepts is the modest implications they have for the difference between the methods that the consultancy companies utilize. They are all fairly similar – and are only very slowly and gradually evolving in response to the flow of management notions, «hence we can reuse our old methods» (C4).

«Our method is pretty similar today [as ten years ago], but is gradually modified as we go along» (C7)

The informants from the consultancy companies tell that they do not market themselves through methods any more. What they sell are concrete suggestions about what they can do for their customers. One of the academic informants who has studied BPR consultants and have some experience himself from BPR consulting, supports the view that companies do not compete through reference to a method or a particular product, but rather by their reputation of solidity or creativity:

«The companies 'stand for something', and if you need consultants, then you know that we stand for something» (C3).

The question is of course what this 'something' is. The emphasis on 'process' rather than BPR as a radical novelty, common to our informants, implies that BPR has become a kind of doxa of management consulting. Willoch told us that:

«The point is that the effect of being new is gone, but BPR has become a craft, and that is good».

However, being a doxa - a self-evident part of a «modern» practice - is even better.

From the outset, as described in the early work, the proponents of BPR made strong and controversial claims about the need to break radically with existing practises and to swiftly implement necessary changes. This was one of the characteristic features of BPR, one which used to distinguish it from the mainstream of alternative approaches. It was also undoubtable one of the reasons attracted so much attention. The prospect of a clean-cut break with all your everyday worries and short-comings probably was quite attractive. How come this feature got purged from the presently prevailing conception of BPR?

The early version of BPR may be summarised in the following manner:

- Large, not small changes
- Process, not functional, orientation
- Delegation/empowerment
- Use of IT.

The first point, the emphasis on radical and hence swiftly implemented changes, is perhaps the most characteristic of the orthodox view. However, there is overwhelming evidence that Hammer's early claim for radical changes was abandoned at an early stage. Such changes was difficult, particularly in the Norwegian context with an institutionalised tradition for work life democracy and social partnership:

«Radical changes? No, we are of course always interested in implementing radical changes, but we need to be cautious. We frighten away our customers if we bring along our grand plans for radical changes and how fast they are to be implemented». (C8)

Hence, it was not analytic arguments or systematic experience that made radical change disappear from BPR in Norway. This was a pragmatic response to rising worries from customers. Other informants modify this slightly by making the issue of radical changes contingent on context, or more specifically the business sector:

«Radical changes are all about risk – and vary from one business sector to another. It is most likely in the oil business» (C7)

Nevertheless, the main impression is that:

«There aren't many projects that aim for dramatic changes. A sensible thing I believe. There aren't many large projects; they tend to be more restricted ... . I'm not sure how many 'dramatic re-engineering' projects there have been in Norway. A few. I know of one from the Army. These projects you learn about from your colleagues .... Today the projects are conducted faster – everything is faster. It comes closer to continuous improvement than large, dramatic changes in the BPR style». (C4)

The emergent pattern, not altogether surprising, seems to be that the BPR proponents' claim for radical changes was only present at the espoused level,

never in actual use. As observed by a senior academic who has followed BPR in Norway closely from the early days:

> «The majority of those who have attempted the 'real' Hammer [with radical changes] have ended in a catastrophe – of course … . The BPR label existed for only a very short period of time. It was too threatening … . It generated fear». (C9)

Part of the radicalness of BPR was of course due to the ambition to be a kind of holistic approach. The introduction of ERP systems like SAP meant a translation from holism and the consequent radicalism to a more partial and stepwise approach. Thus, the erosion of radicalness of BPR could also be perceived as a consequence of these new IT-based systems:

> «In the beginning, BPR was supposed to be a reengineering strategy that included a kind of holistic approach, that you should interpret process perspective as a total strategy for re-organization of the corporation. This was most common in the oil industry. In the insurance business, to a much larger degree, they changed smaller processes one by one. They made priorities among processes». (C3)

Willoch, like many of the consultants we interviewed, also made reference to common perceptions about differences between industrial relations in the US and in Scandinavia:

> «In the US, you can demand a change, but in Scandinavia you can't demand a change, you have to make it become so that the employees want to do it».

As we showed in section 4, when he was asked about his contribution to the concept of BPR, Willoch claimed that this was the introduction of a «Scandinavian view» of what one need to change. One needs to consider, her argues, that there is "the soft dimension in this, what are the consequences of process thinking for the individual".

It seems to be an established truth among consultants that all changes, especially fundamental ones, need to be made subject to broad participation, in order to achieve successful change (Moltu 1999). This view is legitimated by reference to efficiency, which is supposed to be greater when employees participate. According to Norwegian legislation and industrial agreements, participation is also a democratic right. Hence, it makes sense, as one consultant does, to explain how changes in Norwegian work life really hinge on participation:

> «For BPR to be successful, you absolutely need to involve people. To achieve real change, you need the participation from below and to shift power and decision-making downwards. This is the case, even if the project enters the organisation from the top (...). You need to involve the unions whenever you want to attempt anything serious. In my experience, the Norwegian unions are both constructive and create – provided they are involved early enough in the process». (C4)

Others point to the fact that participation and union involvement is mandatory:

«The unions? Certainly, I forget exactly what that piece of legislation is called, but [the unions] of course have rights so we always make sure they are involved. At least to inform our customer [typically, management] that they have to make a plan which identifies all the involved unions». (C8)

Participation is in this way made a part of a standard change strategy. It is inscribed as a part of the standard procedures. This does not mean that subordinate employees will have a lot of influence (Hatling & Sørensen 1998), but it is nevertheless interesting to note that we were told that:

«We have included [user participation] in our set of success factor criterions. It represents a risk factor in the project». (C8)

This makes the implementation of BPR in Norway different from countries with different traditions and less strict legislation.

An additional point is that one of the initial critiques of BPR was that the radical and top-down strategy was incompatible with participatory ideals. This criticism has become less valid, since BPR has been transformed into a gradual, painfully slow process:

«BPR is a process of maturing which require a long period of time. The easy part is to agree on the process map. But the difficult part is to implement this … . And we, the consultants, are primarily engaged in the former [easy] part and not in the latter [difficult] one». (C7)

In this manner, we may observe that the novel and controversial set of ideas called BPR, originally perceived as breaking radically with traditional thinking, has been transformed into something non-controversial and rather trivial. At least, this is the account of the consultants.

The trivialisation of the original BPR notion has taken place by gradually removing problematic (but characteristic!) aspects. Today, BPR is presented by our informants as something that is utterly obvious, that captures whatever is sensible:

«BPR is nothing but plain common-sense, it is what works».

Or, put in another way:

«Everything is a BPR project – there is some fiddling with IT, organisations and business processes». (C8)

This means that

«The concept of BPR has over the years degenerated, today it represents 'improvement', something that is really quite obvious». (C7)

To many consultants, this means that the BPR label is unimportant, maybe even uninteresting:

«I'm not really interested in theoretical concepts, I go about doing my business without worrying about the names. The name 'BPR' I met at university but never since. To me, all these three letter

abbreviations are the same …. . It is all about streamlining the work
processes, a kind of integration». (C6)

The consultants have different strategies to make their way of thinking into something more exotic, less trivial. Who would, after all, pay generously for "plain common-sense"? A key move is branding, that is, to present (a version of) BPR but dressed up in your own name:

«Nobody talks about BPR anymore in Norway…. . It has a certain
negative connotation» (C5)

Hence, BPR activities may be categorised as 'change management, CM' or simply as 'Process'. Branding through labelling is a strategic move, not at all coincidental (see table 1).

«We use this [branding] quite consciously towards our customers».
(C5)

In relation to such efforts, it is interesting to note that there seems to be surprisingly few successful Norwegian BPR projects to tell about. None of the consultants we interviewed were able to tell any success-stories about reengineering projects. Most of them could describe difficulties in "implementing" BPR, and they would mention that it was considered as a very expensive type of project. But no recipe of success.

On the other hand, without any encouragement, practically all our informants among the consultants, started to talk about e-commerce when asked about strategies for change today. In a similar way, several also emphasised the role of ERP systems in change projects. This raises questions about why, and in what way, do management consultants see BPR elements in these more recent efforts? And what lessons about the transformation/mutation/evolution of management concepts does this teach us?

As noted above, a number of the management consultants saw a strong element of continuity in what at first glance appeared to be a steady stream of distinct ideas and concepts (quality improvement, process orientation, lean production, knowledge management, balance score card, etc., etc.). One aspect is the way a new concept may open up new possibilities to translate and inscribe earlier ideas. The present heat around e-commerce illustrates this nicely. In effect, e-commerce is portrayed as the most important carrier or medium of (the remainders of) BPR – just as ERP systems were a few years ago:

«There are only very few large enterprises today where we are
allowed to enter and   to seriously question the functional
organisation of work. We have done something in connection with
SAP introduction projects … but then it is often an adaption of the
organisation to the system. But the present focus on e-commerce
and Internet paves the road for completely new ways of organising
the work … they realise that mere adjustments are not sufficient, a
fundamental reshuffle is called for». (C7)

There is an important difference here. Large enterprises tend to change through hybridisation, that is, by spawning off and exploring alternatives alongside – not

within – the traditional organisation. Only small organisations actually manage to change substantially via e-commerce, according to our informants.

The difference between small and big change, that gradually became evident with BPR, is reproduced with e-business today. One informant makes the distinction between 'e-business' and merely 'e-commerce':

> «E-commerce is a restricted restructuring while e-business is, like old-fashioned BPR, to change dramatically. Very few have actually tried e-commerce yet. Basically it's only the small dot.coms. This is because it's a lot more cumbersome for larger organisations, for instance, banks. Here, it's more common to experiment alongside, not within, the formal organisation ... but e-business does not start from a vacuum ... because ERP systems are the heart of the future's e-business». (C4)

Until fairly recently, ERP projects were advocated in order to implement major, BPR-like changes especially in large enterprises.

> «BPR-like projects today are dressed up as ERP projects ... because the reason behind ERP systems is to advocate horizontal value chains instead of systems that where separated functionally as this hampered integration». (C5)

This is written off by others as too conservative in the sense that ERP projects represent an approach to change where «you know where you are going and what you want to achieve» while

> «E-business represents change where you don't know exactly where you're heading, when you are more explorative and willing to make more radical changes». (C8)

Or, quite simply: «The modern form of BPR is e-business» (C4) or «E-business is the extension of BPR» (C5).

These statements supports the claim of spokesperson Willoch that BPR came to early, technologically speaking. It is only recently that the kind of ICT systems have been made available, which facilitates the realisation of the process thinking in BPR.

11. Norwegian BPR and the nature of uptake

A striking aspect of the manner in which BPR was discussed by our informants, academics and consultants alike, is the deeply ambiguous character of the label. On the one hand, there are the originally controversial and novel aspects of BPR, on the other, a rather dramatic reduction of the whole set of ideas into plain common-sense. BPR has been domesticated. This means that it has entered business change thinking in Norway, a constituency of suppliers and users have been shaped, and a variety of practices have been established. At the end of the day, domestication has meant that BPR appears in a way that makes it diffuse and doxa-like. The radical edge has been lost, but the emphasis on process in relation to the value chain, rather than function, has become an obligatory point of

passage. BPR has succeeded, but only by allowing very flexible interpretations, maybe even transformations. But perhaps it is the great flexibility, in combination by the well-composed ambiguity of radical novelty and plain common sense that in fact accounts for BPR's considerable impact?

The story of the Norwegian uptake of BPR begins in the image of the US as the source of industrial progress. Young Norwegians come to the US and discover new ideas that they bring back home. However, some translations happen on the way. BPR is interpreted from particular professional points of view, like logistics or computer systems design, and the efforts to use BPR as a consulting strategy has to take local culture, including industrial relations, into consideration.

Nevertheless, the resulting transformation of BPR does not easily lend itself to interpretations in terms of Norwegian-ness or Scandinavian-ness. Many of the observed features, like the departure from radical change strategies and the conflation of BPR with more recent concepts like ERP or e-business, are probably quite common features in most countries. Also, the lack of sustained public controversy over BPR makes it difficult to assess the domestication process. For example, one might have expected that BPR, with its US connotation to downsizing, would be criticised as antithetical to Norwegian work life culture or to trade unions. However, the only published account of a juxtaposition between BPR and the dominant ideology of workplace reform in Norway, sosiotechnical design, argues the opposite view: Norwegian culture represents a positive asset to BPR projects!

A problem in assessing this process of uptake is the lack relevant studies of similar phenomenons. The field of organisation studies has shown little interest in such processes. The important exception presented in section 2, Abrahamson's model of management fashion, proved to be misleading. This was mainly because the model suggested that fashion-setting in management could be compared to haute couture, where there is a community that provides the fashion-setting impact. Our study of BPR in Norway suggests that management concepts have greater stability, and thus that the notion of a fashion-setting community is rather problematic. Many important promoters of BPR, among them the spokesperson Bjørn Erik Willoch, have remained quite faithful to this concept, even if changes have been made. This relationship has lasted for more than 10 years, so that BPR clearly is an important part of the professional identity of these promoters.

Also, the image of «diffusion of knowledge» found in the field of science studies, proved to be misleading. This is mainly due to the fact that current theories from that field explicitly or implicitly assumes the existence of scientific centres that carry some authority to decide on interpretations. Arguably, BPR originated in a US academic setting, and there was a small academic community in Norway that was important to the diffusion of BPR in Norway. But neither the US «centre» nor the Norwegian academics were able to police any kind of standardisation of BPR. In fact, the Norwegian uptake of BPR was more explicitly shaped by consulting activities, including seminars and talks by consultants, than by research and teaching undertaken by academics. The main

channel of uptake of BPR in Norway was a spokesperson, Bjørn Erik Willoch, his book and his seminars, in combination with other consultants.

The domestication model emphasizes the need to focus on practice and meaning, including an interest in the development of new institutions. Our findings are consistent with its assumptions, since we have observed the establishment of particular Norwegian or Scandinavian ways of practising BPR as well as efforts to give it a local meaning as «continuous improvement» or «just common sense». At the end of the day, no new institutions of distinction have been established. Basically, existing academic and consulting institutions seem to have been able to appropriate BPR, even if the concept never really caught on in any academic community.

Of course, a study like this raises the issue of whether there are any core-set or essential properties of BPR. Do we have criteria that allow us to classify projects as being either BPR or non-BPR? When the orthodox ideas of radicalness and non-continuous change have been revoked, is there really anything left?

Basically, we have left the task of defining BPR to our informants. We have not superimposed any pre-given concept of BPR. Clearly, they have performed a flexible job. BPR turned out to be a rather open-ended and flexible concept, under which a lot of different practices could be subsumed. However, this is less surprising than the fact that we have not been able to observe any real conflict over definitions. True, definitions and accounts differ. But in the narratives of our informants, there are few if any traces of the kind of boundary work usually observed in professionalised and scientific fields. None of the consultants we have interviewed, did suggest that some other company did not «really» do BPR. None of the academics suggested anything similar.

This suggests that the dynamics of phenomenons like BPR is not very well understood. Clearly, BPR is not a scientific enterprise, even if it is - at least to some extent - a scientific product. But BPR is not ideology either, in the meaning that it is just a bundle of ideas. It is a product of knowledge work, probably not an uncommon one, but with features that are not yet known. Our uptake study indicates that its dynamic needs further exploration.

12. Literature

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