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Who decides the shape of product markets? The knowledge institutions that name and categorise new technologies

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ABSTRACT

We consider naming and categorization practises within the information technology (IT) arena. In particular, with how certain terminologies are able to colonise wide areas of activity and endure for relatively long periods of time, despite the diversity and incremental evolution of individual technical instances. This raises the question as to who decides whether or not a particular vendor technology is part of a product category. Who decides the boundaries around a technology nomenclature? Existing Information Systems scholarship has tended to present terminologies as shaped by wide communities of players but this does not capture how particular kinds of knowledge institutions have emerged in recent year to police the confines of technological fields. The paper follows the work of one such group of experts—the industry analyst firm Gartner Inc.—and discusses their current and past role in the evolution of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software. We show how they make regular (but not always successful) 'naming interventions' within the IT domain and how they attempt to regulate the boundaries that they and others have created through episodes of 'categorisation work'. These experts not only attempt to exercise control over a terminology but also the interpretation of that name. Our arguments are informed by ethnographic observations carried out on the eve of the contemporary CRM boom and interviews conducted more recently as part of an ongoing investigation into industry analysts. The paper bridges a number of disparate bodies of literature from Information Systems, Economic Sociology, the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, and Science and Technology Studies.

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1. Introduction

Names matter. The ways in which new technologies are named and categorised is a matter of basic importance to Information Systems (IS) research and other social scientific analyses. As those who have studied the information technology (IT) arena for any length of time will tell you, there appears a compulsion within this domain to rename technologies (Currie, 2004; Swanson & Ramiller, 1997). IT vendors periodically (and repeatedly) designate offerings differently from those of previous generations or from competitors. Between 1990 and 2002, for instance, industry application software vendors used nearly 400 different terminologies to describe products (Pontikes, 2008). The conventional explanation for this is that competition pushes vendors to differentiate products from those of rivals. No one wants to be seen to be emulating a competitor and a new name would appear to constitute one important way to distinguish a difference.

Yet, despite this compulsion, certain designations appear able to colonise wide areas of activity (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). Some technologies may be given a standard nomenclature that can then prevail for a significant period of time (as evidenced by the recent examples of MRP, MRPII, ERP, CRM etc.). These names refer not to a specific homogeneous product but to a more or less heterogeneous collection of artefacts (software, management techniques) which then went onto link a community (or, rather, several overlapping communities) of suppliers, intermediaries and adopters. Such terminologies proposed a boundary that linked a group of (often quite various) artefacts while differentiating them from others. This begs an important question that IS scholars have yet fully to answer.

Who decides? Who determines the boundaries around a product terminology? By this we intend the question as to who judges whether or not an individual technology instance is included as part of a wider terminology. In other words, who, if anyone, is naming and categorising technological fields?

Current scholarship has tended towards a *communitarian* framing of this important issue. Who shapes a name? *The community does*. The overall conception of a product market is seen to be moulded not by any one specific individual or group but by vendors, adopters, journalists and consultants together, in what Wang and Ramiller (2009) have described broadly as the 'innovation community'. Terminologies gain traction precisely because no one group or actor has the final say on their shape and meaning. Passing through many hands a name becomes a hook that can facilitate a variety of understandings and interpretations leading all sorts of vendors to rebadge their systems according to the latest terminology. Indeed, such diversity and ambiguity in meaning is seen to lead to richness and robustness in the process of innovation around a terminology (Swanson & Ramiller, 1997).

This kind of formulation seems less adequate today. It represents a rather imprecise way to characterise what in fact has become a more organised process. One only has to look back at the recent history of information systems development, for instance, to see that, although the early stages of recent major innovations were characterised by initial ambiguity, later developments were pursued in a more structured manner. This was because at the outset of today's modern corporate information system, the 'institutions of information technology' were often rudimentary and inchoate (and early accounts of these categories resembled the communitarian account above), but, over time, the institutional framework surrounding these technologies have become better established (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 2001; Swanson, 2010; Wang & Swanson, 2007, 2008). Comparing the development of information systems today with the development of systems from just a couple of decades ago, we are struck by the number of specialised intermediaries that now surround workplace information technologies.

We suggest that the communitarian view might be strengthened through foregrounding the emergence in recent years of the *knowledge institutions of information technology* that attempt to draw up and police the boundaries that surround new technological fields of activity (Swanson, 2010). Clearly, vendors and other members of the wider community still feature centrally in the designation of a technology. However, the consensus surrounding an emerging field can often nowadays be steered *inter alia* by specialist forms of consultant known as 'industry analysts'. We are not alone in noting this important development. Wang and Ramiller (2009: 20) have pointed to how it is industry analysts who are often the 'originators' of new terminologies or, if not the authors, the body at least which attempts to "provide the first public articulation of [an] innovation" (see also Swanson, 2010). What we want to do here is to develop this insight further through describing and conceptualising in detail the work of one highly influential industry analyst firm.

Our argument is that it is industry analysts who have established the cognitive authority to exercise control over the labelling of a technology and subsequent interpretation of that name. They do so through