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# Power matters: the importance of Foucault's power/knowledge as a conceptual lens in KM research and practice

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to engage knowledge management (KM) researchers and practitioners with Foucault's power/knowledge lens as a way of thinking about and recognising the central role of power in organisational knowledge cultures.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The empirical illustrations in this paper are drawn from two qualitative studies in different professional and institutional contexts (insurance and theatre work). Both studies used in-depth interviews and discourse analysis as their principal methods of data collection and analysis.

**Findings** – The empirical examples illustrate how practitioners operate within complex power/knowledge relations that shape their practices of knowledge sharing, generation and use. The findings show how an application of the power/knowledge lens renders visible both the constraining and productive force of power in KM.

**Research limitations/implications** – Researchers may apply the conceptual tools presented here in a wider variety of institutional and professional contexts to examine the complex and multifaceted role of power in a more in-depth way.

**Practical implications** – KM professionals will benefit from an understanding of organisational power/knowledge relations when seeking to promote transformational changes in their organisations and build acceptance for KM initiatives.

**Originality/value** – This paper addresses a gap in the literature around theoretical and empirical discussions of power as well as offering an alternative to prevailing resource-based views of power in KM.

**Keywords** Organizational culture, Organizational politics, Knowledge management, Knowledge sharing, Conflict, Power

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

"Knowledge is Power" has become a truism so widely accepted as to have become a cliché – the stuff of bumper stickers and high school graduation speeches. Yet, as several critics have noted, from a theoretical point of view, power and power relations have received relatively little attention in the knowledge management (KM) literature (Gordon and Grant, 2005; Hislop, 2013; Kaerreman, 2010; Olsson, 2007; Schultze and Stabell, 2004). In 2005, Gordon and Grant's (2005) quantitative content analysis of KM journal articles found that despite the increasing interest in socio-cultural issues, the concept of power remained underexplored. This gap in the literature was highlighted again more recently by Hislop (2013, p. 187) who argues that "discussions of power are typically marginalized, if not completely absent" in the writing on KM.

The reason for this is likely related to the fact that prevailing approaches to power continue overwhelmingly to adopt a resource-based, top-down approach: power is something that

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**“Power appears as a barrier to the kind of egalitarian social relations that are seen as a requisite for learning, knowledge sharing, and innovation.”**

elite individuals or groups possess, which they use to control the thoughts and actions of others. Yet, this notion of power as control is one that sits uneasily with Western liberal values of egalitarianism and participatory democracy. Perhaps, as a result, the KM field has been dominated by a consensus-based view of social order that considers social relations as predominantly harmonious (Schultze and Stabell, 2004). If power relations are considered at all, they tend to be treated as “a persistent problem which needs to be overcome and nullified if learning is to take place” (Easterby-Smith and Araujo, 1999, p. 5). Power appears as a barrier to the kind of egalitarian social relations that are seen as a requisite for learning, knowledge sharing and innovation.

Yet, social scientists have for some decades emphasized the philosophical naivety of viewing power in this way (see, in particular, Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1980). One of their central insights is that “all organizations are relations of power – even the most egalitarian” (Brown *et al.*, 2010, p. 525). Collaborative ways of interacting among peers are as much the product of specific power relations as excessive knowledge hoarding and influencing tactics. This understanding of power is grounded in an epistemology which considers power and knowledge as inseparable and mutually constituted (Foucault, 1980). However, while a small number of KM researchers have drawn on Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge (Hayes and Walsham, 2000; Heizmann, 2011; Marshall and Rollinson, 2004; Olsson, 2007; Sewell, 2005), mainstream KM research and practice is focussed on the management of apparently “neutral” knowledge assets, largely without considering the institutional “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1977) that shapes practitioners’ knowledge practices.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to expand KM researchers’ and practitioners’ “tool-box” (Foucault, 1974) for thinking about the central role of power in organisational knowledge cultures. Drawing on empirically embedded insights from two very different knowledge cultures – an insurance corporation and a theatre company, this paper illustrates the value of the power/knowledge lens in explaining how practitioners’ knowledge practices are subject to modalities of power. The paper contributes to the extant KM literature by offering a theoretically grounded discussion of the concept of power beyond the prevailing resource-based view. It also provides empirical illustrations of the application of Foucault’s power/knowledge lens in KM research and practice.

### **Theoretical background**

While the concept of power has rarely been a focus in the KM literature, there is a growing acknowledgment of the need to take power relations seriously (Hislop, 2013; Kaerreman, 2010; Kelly, 2007; Rechberg and Syed, 2013). Recent contributions have particularly provided discussions of the conflict over knowledge ownership in organisations, resulting in knowledge withholding or hoarding of individuals (Kelly, 2007; Rechberg and Syed, 2013). However, given the prevalence of resource-based approaches to power and KM (Gordon and Grant, 2005), the authors argue that there is a need for a greater appreciation of the distinct contribution of the power/knowledge lens to KM research and practice.

Power is a central sociological construct for researchers assuming a dissensus-based view of social order (Schultze and Stabell, 2004). Such a view acknowledges conflict as an “inherent feature” of the relations between social groups “both in business organisations, and society more widely” (Hislop, 2013, p. 188). Taking power seriously means paying

attention to the diverging interests among organisational actors, as well as to the ways in which these interests are being given authority. Historically, the dissensus-based view has shaped a number of conceptual approaches to power (Clegg, 1989; Clegg and Haugaard, 2009), from which two have been identified as particularly relevant to the analysis of organisational knowledge practices (Hislop, 2013): the resource-based approach (French and Raven, 1959; Pfeffer, 1981) and Foucault's power/knowledge lens (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980).

#### *Power as a resource*

As Gordon and Grant's (2005, p. 30) study of the KM literature found, those scholarly articles that do mention power are typically informed by a resource-based approach which conceptualises power as an entity that actors may come to possess and use to exercise influence over others (Schultze and Stabell, 2004, p. 564). Power resources are "those things which bestow the means whereby the behaviour of others may be influenced" (Hales, 1993, p. 20, cited in Hislop, 2013, p. 190). They include the ability to offer rewards and/or punishment (reward and coercive power), the extent to which someone's role or position affords an actor with authority as well as the extent to which other actors admire or respect the actor (legitimate power and reference power), and finally, the possession of particular knowledge and skills that are considered as important in a given context (expert power) (French and Raven, 1959).

The implications of this approach in the context of KM are two-fold:

1. The successful generation, sharing and use of knowledge are predominantly seen as being dependent on an actor's ability to influence others through their use of various power resources.
2. An emphasis is placed on the power of some actors over others, e.g. via the use of impression management, knowledge hoarding and/or selective knowledge-sharing strategies that increase an actor's position of power.

While resource-based approaches to power acknowledge the importance of taking into account the extent to which an actor's audience accepts these strategies, the central focus is on the personal use of power among some actors and its constraining effects on others. What this view fails to recognise, however, is that power underpins all knowledge practices; and that in doing so, it effectively produces the social relations which make up an organisation.

#### *Foucault's power/knowledge lens*

In contrast to the resource-based approach, Foucault's understanding of power is fundamentally relational (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978, 1980). Foucault, a historian, recognised that a key feature of the development of the modern state was a fundamental shift in the nature of power relations. Foucault suggests that in contemporary society power is no longer primarily "a privilege that one might possess" but rather operates within "a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity" (Foucault, 1977, pp. 26-27). In other words, power is not simply held by particular actors and wielded over others. Rather, it is co-produced in social interactions through the way people negotiate meaning in reference

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**“Foucault’s power/knowledge lens offers a distinct contribution for KM research and practice in offering a way to see power not just as a constraining force but also – via discursive practice – as productive of different ways of collaborating and engaging with each other.”**

to existing power/knowledge relations. Therefore, in a business context, power cannot be exercised at will but relies on the “politics of interpretation” (Marshall and Rollinson, 2004; Weick, 1995) that shape an organisation and influence whether particular truth statements become accepted and validated. A twenty-first century chief executive officer, for example, operates in a fundamentally different system of power relations from a Dark Age warlord or a Roman emperor. In a modern organisation, power is “decentred”, it is vested not in any individual but rather in the organisational structure itself, the defined roles of its members and the social rules and shared culture which support them.

Foucault’s relational perspective implies that rather than seeing power and knowledge as discrete entities, they should be viewed as inseparable – two sides of the same coin: power/knowledge:

We should admit [. . .] that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault, 1977, p. 27)

Foucault’s argument is that particular knowledge (e.g. how to provide “good” leadership) is organised and activated within multiple discourses (e.g. autocratic leadership, transformational leadership). As there are no statements outside of the world of discourse, every statement or “truth claim” we make is discursively shaped. Furthermore, every truth claim made within a particular discourse is an exercise of power – with greater or lesser impact depending on the context of practice in which it is made. For instance, a senior Chinese manager issuing directives to his “subordinates” in the 1990s would have likely been considered as exercising “good” leadership, whereas at the same time, a more dialogic communication style would have likely been valued in an increasingly participatory Western business context. Hence, Foucault’s approach directs our attention to the relative authority of particular discourses in a given cultural and historical context – the broader power/knowledge relations – as a way of understanding how some claims to knowledge come to be more powerful than others.

The distinct value of using Foucault’s power/knowledge lens in the analysis of these practices lies in the fact that it exposes the relational character of dysfunctional or collaborative relations among organisational members and the ways in which these are linked to their communication practices. While the resource-based view of power would direct our attention to single actors’ use of power resources (e.g. giving an order, knowledge withholding, distorting of a message), a Foucauldian perspective highlights that these practices are only effective within broader authority relations and that, perhaps more importantly, the array of actors’ individual tactics (expressed communicatively) engage with these broader structures of power/knowledge.

It is perhaps important to note that Foucault’s work has often been drawn upon with reference to the constraining effects of discourse (Marshall and Rollinson, 2004). Through the socio-historic study of institutions (e.g. prisons, clinics) and specific topics (e.g. sexuality), Foucault proposed that discourses regulate conduct and force human beings to

discipline themselves. He describes this as “the submission of bodies through control of ideas” (Foucault, 1977, p. 102). From this perspective, KM would be seen primarily as a discursive system of coercion and control, leading to the creation of self-disciplined knowledge workers (Sewell, 2005).

However, while the use of Foucault’s work in this way offers an important and valuable critique of KM practice, it is equally important to consider Foucault’s emphasis on the productive effects of power. Power is not only negative:

[. . .] it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but [. . .] it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be thought of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body (Foucault, 1980, p. 119).

In other words, Foucault’s power/knowledge lens offers a way to see power as productive of the specific truth claims and rationalities that shape societies at large and organisations more specifically. KM, from this perspective, can be understood as a mechanism of creating space for multiple forms of knowledge and marginalised voices, as well as for deconstructing seemingly self-evident power relations and discursive practices (Schultze and Stabell, 2004, p. 560). Being sensitive to these multiple forms of knowledge and voice can provide KM researchers and practitioners with a better understanding of the complex “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1977) that shapes organisational knowledge sharing, generation and use. The remainder of this paper will expand on these claims by illustrating the use of Foucault’s power/knowledge lens in the analysis of two very different organisational knowledge cultures.

### Research methods

To demonstrate how power/knowledge can be useful in a KM context, the authors draw on case examples from their own empirical research in a large insurance corporation (Heizmann, 2011, 2012, 2015) and a major theatre company (Olsson, 2010, 2013). Both of these studies were guided by a social constructionist and practice-theoretical epistemological standpoint (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2003; Gherardi, 2009, 2012; Nicolini, 2013). The case examples have been chosen purposefully to highlight how power/knowledge dynamics influence knowledge practices across two very different organisational and professional contexts, as well as to show how these domains of practice constitute very specific power/knowledge relations. By comparing the two cases, it is possible to foreground different aspects that can be exposed through an application of the power/knowledge lens (Bryman, 2008). The empirical examples did not form part of a multiple-case design (Yin, 2009); however, they offer a means to illustrate some of the theoretical ideas and concepts outlined earlier. In this, the authors follow the approach of Thomas (2011) and Flyvbjerg (2001) who emphasise the value of using case narratives to reveal “concrete, context-dependent knowledge” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 73) which allows readers to expand their horizon of interpretation for specific problems within their own context of experience.

While the studies have been discussed in more detail elsewhere (Heizmann, 2011, 2012, 2015; Olsson, 2010, 2013), the authors wish to highlight two key features that were common

**“Unlike prevailing resource-based views of power, the Foucauldian perspective offers a relational view of power which KM researchers and practitioners can use to unpack power dynamics in their specific institutional and socio-cultural context.”**

to their methodological approach. First, both studies adopted a qualitative approach and used semi-structured and/or conversational in-depth interviews as their principal method of data collection (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Participants were selected through a combination of snowball sampling, at the early stages of the research, and theoretical sampling at later stages on the basis of the researchers' emerging theoretical focus (Bryman, 2008, p. 458). All of the interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Follow-up interviews and email correspondence with participants were used to discuss emerging findings, check potential biases and explore rival explanations (Kvale, 1996, p. 242). Participants therefore played an active role in the co-construction of findings and helped to increase the validity of the final reports. In addition, both researchers used field notes from site observations and organisational documents to gain a better understanding of the participants' discursive context and triangulate evidence from the interviews (Yin, 2009).

Second, the data were analysed using an inductive, discourse analytic approach which involved identifying prevailing discursive constructions in the respective contexts without strong pre-conceptions from the theory (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Phillips and Hardy, 2002). The studies' aims were not to test a pre-defined theory or hypothesis, but to develop a contextual, situated understanding of participants' knowledge practices. A common assumption of the studies was that "social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be meaningfully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning" (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Therefore, the studies' analysis focussed on how the participants' statements could be understood as "truth claims" in relation to broader discourses that governed the participants' field of practice (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). In keeping with the critical tradition in discourse analysis, this involved examining the way in which particular discursive statements are interrelated within a broader socio-cultural and political "order of discourse" (Fairclough, 2003).

It is worth noting that neither of these studies adopted a conventional, text-based approach to discourse analysis, as used by Foucault himself. Nor were Foucault's ideas, although a central influence, the only conceptual framework employed by the researchers. Our aim in this article is not to promote a Foucauldian orthodoxy but rather to encourage other KM researchers and practitioners to consider for themselves how they might incorporate Foucault's concept of power/knowledge into their own practice.

This approach to Foucault's work is one that he himself encouraged; he stated that his work should be seen as:

[. . .] a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area [. . .] I don't write for an audience, I write for users, not readers. (Foucault, 1974, pp. 523-524)

## Two cases of power/knowledge dynamics in practice

### *Case 1: knowledge culture change in an insurance firm*

Our first case is situated within InsuCo Australia (pseudonym), the Australian arm of a multinational insurance firm. Participants across different teams and departments mentioned consistently the existence of a silo mentality which offered a first indicator of underlying power/knowledge relations:

Compared to other organisations I don't see everyone working together the way that they should, because we're all here for a common goal. But I see that entirely in the organisation as it is. I see people looking after their area in their silos, and that's their focus and their priority (Linda, Marketing).

Within this context, human resources (HR) professionals were charged with the task of promoting a shift towards a "high performance culture" that valued more collaborative knowledge-sharing behaviours. This change initiative involved a range of discursive activities that were directed at changing the behaviour of business unit managers:

including the dissemination of brochures on the role of leadership, the facilitation of leadership workshops and the conduct of one-on-one coaching sessions with managers.

However, HR professionals frequently commented on the complexity of triggering changes to InsuCo's broader organisational knowledge culture. Promoting a shift from a "knowledge is power" discourse to a "knowledge sharing is power" discourse was challenging in the context of an organisation that had traditionally valued competitive behaviours for individuals and teams. As one participant stated:

In this organisation, "knowledge is power" and you hold on to whatever information you have got, and you do not share it, because that's where your power sits. (Kate, HR Communications specialist)

As the company had previously been structured in a large group of silos that operated relatively autonomously and competed with other parts of the business, knowledge-sharing behaviours had not traditionally been afforded with discursive legitimacy. Therefore, efforts to "modernise" the organisation's knowledge culture were met with counter-discourses that undermined the cultural transformation project. For example, when asked about the value of implementing specific changes instigated by the HR department (e.g. team rewards, employee development opportunities), one business manager replied:

You have to see [. . .] in the context of InsuCo the focus has always been historically on the bottom line. And let's not forget that that's part of our success. Financial performance of the business is and should be the number 1 priority. (Steve, business unit manager)

What made HR professionals' change agency role so complex was InsuCo's prevalent "regime of truth" according to which support services such as HR and Marketing assumed a subordinate role to business functions:

We don't bring in money and that's a big thing in this organisation [. . .] we're a cost. That always makes a big difference. (Kathryn, Human Resources)

In a context that attributed primary relevance to the bottom-line, the degree to which a group contributed to business results centrally informed its legitimacy. Business unit managers frequently expressed this status of hegemony:

They should put themselves in the shoes of consultancy. We're paying a lot of money to support an HR function. Add the value to the business. If that was outsourced they'd be under pretty significant scrutiny in terms of return. (Nick, business unit manager)

Importantly, these power dynamics manifested themselves in the knowledge-sharing relations between HR practitioners and business unit managers. Business unit managers challenged and, at times, openly resisted HR knowledge and practices. As one HR manager related, it was difficult to build mutually engaged knowledge-sharing relationships in a discursive context where little authority was ascribed to HR knowledge:

Some parts of the business won't allow their staff members to come to training sessions. Because they think that they're not necessary [. . .] that they take up time away from what really counts to them, which is the bottom line, which is about making money, so, "why should I send my team to a workshop on effective performance discussions"? (Ken, Human Resources)

Therefore, to develop more effective knowledge-sharing relationships with InsuCo business units, HR practitioners needed to find ways to justify and legitimate their unit's perspective. The participants' accounts showed that these strategies tied in with the bottom-line discourse that governed business unit managers' practices. For instance, HR professionals framed HR issues as enablers of "high performance" and emphasised their contribution to the bottom-line in power point presentations and strategic documents. They also made increased use of quantitative survey data, drawing on a recently introduced organisational culture survey, as a means to provide "hard" evidence that justified the need for HR initiatives. As one of the participants explained:



You need to communicate in a manner consistent with the communication style of this organisation [ . . . ]. Managers kept saying "I still don't see how this is going to impact on my team's performance". And that's why the organisational culture survey has been great for us. Now we can say "according to your team's engagement results, you need to pick up your game." (Gary, Human Resources)

The previous example shows how knowledge sharing is not an autonomous process of communicating "neutral" knowledge assets among business units. Rather practitioners frame knowledge within the conditions of possibility of existing power/knowledge relations – tying in new ideas with what is constructed as acceptable in their prevailing discursive environment. These rhetorical strategies increased HR practitioners' influence over business unit managers in particular communication episodes; however, this authority was not a resource in their possession but a temporary accomplishment within a discursive environment that was in itself subject to internal tensions and changes over time.

For InsuCo HR professionals, engaging in strategies of legitimation enabled them to promote cultural changes. However, it is important to note that their communication practices also played a role in reinforcing existing power/knowledge relations. HR professionals' use of quantitative survey data, for instance, excluded voices and obscured aspects of InsuCo life that were not easily quantifiable. As one participant explained:

The logic goes, "if I can quantify that, if I think about it enough, if I study it, if I break it down, if I measure every little aspect of it", as we do in insurance, "I should be able to build some predictable models". And that doesn't always work, particularly when you are dealing with people. (Daniel, Human Resources)

Therefore, while HR professionals' communication strategies increased their influence, they also contributed to reproducing the instrumentalist approach that was already strongly pervading InsuCo's culture.

### *Case 2: creative knowledge practices in a theatre company*

Our second case study, Burbage Shakespeare (pseudonym), an internationally successful classical theatre company, is drawn from [Olsson's study \(2010, 2013\)](#) of how theatre professionals make sense of Shakespeare during the course of performing one of his plays. Although the following discussion describes knowledge practices in one particular company, it is consistent with [Olsson's \(2010, 2013\)](#) findings in studying a range of companies in the UK, Scandinavia and North America.

One reason for choosing this example is that on the surface, this acclaimed theatre company appears to epitomise the consensus-based, harmonious knowledge culture idealised in KM literature ([Schultze and Stabell, 2004](#)):

There's a great sense of belonging here [ . . . ] You learn the most just being in the rehearsal room with other actors [ . . . ] you can try things out and everyone is really supportive. (Portia, actor)

The director, for example, described the importance of a collegial, cooperative environment:

You need to work together, develop a shared vision of the play. The work, Shakespeare, is bigger than all of us. I have my ideas but I'm working with brilliant actors and designers [ . . . ] we go on this journey together [ . . . ]. (Iago, director)

It is perhaps worth knowing that in the one production included in the study where the director adopted a more *auteur*-like approach, participants expressed much greater levels of discontent and artistic frustration than was evident elsewhere. In the chosen case study company, where many company members had worked together for many seasons, participants overwhelmingly emphasised the good relations they had with their colleagues:

I think that in the end, we're all really passionate about the work and so people here want to help each other make it as good as possible. (Antony, actor)

What the authors wish to demonstrate, however, is that even here discursive regimes of power/knowledge underpin every aspect of the creative practices of theatre professionals. However cooperative a work group may be, decisions need to be taken and strategies agreed upon. In order to do so, group members need to share a common discursive framework through which arguments can be evaluated, contested or confirmed.

As in InsuCo, the study revealed a range of discursive repertoires and practices at work in the Burbage Theatre Company. In contrast to InsuCo, where participants' views tended to be dominated by a single discourse, all Burbage participants engaged with multiple discourses. Indeed, perhaps the most striking feature of the study is that every participant actively used two apparently contradictory discourses that Olsson (2010, 2013) labels the "Authenticity" and "Creativity" repertoires.

The first of these, the "Authenticity" discourse, is grounded in the idea that it is the role of theatre to be the servant of Shakespeare's genius by presenting his work as faithfully as possible:

It's kind of amazing to think of yourself as being part of a tradition that goes back through the centuries [ . . . ] to Shakespeare and the Globe. And I think you feel a responsibility to carry on that tradition, to honour it. (Antony, actor)

The "Creativity" discourse, by contrast values originality of artistic expression and seeks to bring something "*new and fresh*" to each new production:

You need to find new settings, new approaches to the design [ . . . ] get away from "pumpkin pants" Shakespeare! (Sebastian, designer)

The company's shared goal in each production was therefore to balance the competing claims of these two discourses and every participant was able to draw on each one at different times in different situations:

He [the designer] wanted to have this big spectacle in the opening scene, with jugglers and flaming torches, and I just said "That's not Shakespeare! Shakespeare is about the characters!" (Rosencrantz, actor)

Some of the traditionalists were kind of shocked when we started to use Canadian accents rather than RP [Received Pronunciation], wanted to say "the Dook" and not "the Dyuke" but it's about making these characters real for the audience. (Rosalind, voice coach)

Participants' engagement with these competing discourses is a good illustration of the fact that multiple perspectives do not automatically lead to conflict. Indeed, in this instance, it has a clear positive effect. Were the "Authenticity" discourse to be dominant, the likely outcome would be theatre that was simply an exercise in historical recreation, of interest to only a few scholars. Conversely, a production where the "Creativity" discourse was pre-eminent might be rejected by the audience (as avant-garde productions frequently have been) as "not Shakespeare". It is the creative tensions between their competing claims that make each new production both unique and connected to tradition. What made the Burbage knowledge culture so productive was its dialogic nature, the fact that it offered a space for "open conversation" (Gherardi, 2006, p. 146) where multiple narratives and arguments could be discussed and evaluated to achieve a shared purpose. The Burbage company therefore provides a good example of how appropriately bounded dissensus can lead to new, creative outcomes.

The "Authenticity" and "Creativity" discursive repertoires were not unique to the Burbage company. They were found in the accounts of participants in Olsson's study (2010, 2013) from across the UK, Scandinavia and North America. However, the Burbage participants' engagement with these discourses was shaped by their particular organisational/cultural context. This understanding, that organisational knowledge culture is shaped by the interaction between a particular context and broader discursive practices and traditions, is one of the most valuable insights that the Foucauldian discourse analytic perspective offers the KM practitioner.

## Discussion

Participatory knowledge cultures, shaped by egalitarian relations among co-workers, have been hailed as an aspirational ideal in KM research and practice. However, linked to this ideal is either the neglect of power relations altogether or perhaps worse, the view that dissensus – the existence of different interests, arguments and narratives – constitutes a problem that needs to be overcome in “effective” knowledge cultures. We suggest that Foucault’s power knowledge lens provides us with a conceptual “tool-box” (Foucault, 1974) that can help KM researchers and practitioners identify the constraining *and* productive force of power in KM. As the empirical examples have shown, practitioners operate within complex power/knowledge relations that shape their practices of knowledge sharing, generation and use. In this sense, organizations constitute “political sites where various organizational actors and groups struggle to ‘fix’ meaning in ways that will serve their particular interests” (Mumby, 2004, p. 237).

However, some knowledge cultures – and InsuCo represents a good example of this – have developed a strong “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1977), where particular discourses take on a dominant role in shaping its members’ knowledge practices. This can be compared to a conversation that is unevenly distributed, where one participant dominates the exchange among interlocutors. In the same way, a knowledge culture can be dominated by the authority of a particular discourse and, therefore, run the risk of reproducing its own rationalities and practices. To be sure, such “dominant discourses and practices exist in most contemporary workplaces that privilege technical, instrumental measurable outcomes” (Garrick and Clegg, 2000, p. 280). As became apparent in the InsuCo case, this renders the change towards a more participatory knowledge culture more complex as the parameters of what is possible (i.e. what will be accepted) and how it can be achieved (i.e. what constitutes a legitimate course of action) are more narrowly defined. The implications of such “monologic” cultures transcend beyond the work of change agents; they affect the conditions of possibility of knowledge generation and use in every single organisational department, team or work unit. Identifying the prevalent “regime of truth” is therefore a necessary part of understanding the constraints of particular knowledge cultures, as well as of determining how far (and how) existing boundaries can be “pushed”.

The Burbage case example illustrated more specifically how this “pushing” of boundaries, leading to novel and creative practice, unfolds and is connected to power: through the dialogic interplay of various discourses new practices emerge and institutional power relations take shape. In negotiating the “authenticity” and “creativity” discourse, theatre professionals found a way to leverage the co-existence of competing truth claims around what constitutes good Shakespearean theatre practice. Arguably, this helped them create works that were more authentically “Burbage” and connected more effectively with their audience. What became particularly evident in this case was that dissensus is not problematic *per se*, as long as actors affirm the value of other perspectives and productively integrate them in the pursuit of shared goals (Gergen *et al.*, 2004). This lends support to recent findings in KM which show that the existence of multiple knowledge claims in communities of practitioners can facilitate mutual learning (Ferguson and Taminiau, 2014).

The authors believe that this shift in perspective gives reason to pause and reconsider the focus we choose as KM researchers and practitioners. Rather than seeking to eradicate or minimize issues of power, the core question ought to be: How is it possible to work productively within organisational spaces where multiple interests, narratives and arguments co-exist? And more specifically, what conditions allow us to develop knowledge cultures in which the interplay of multiple discursive voices replaces monologue and in which creative practice flourishes? Perhaps the main distinguishing features of the two case examples in this regard are the ways in which the participants constructed other organisational members via their communication practices and the existence of a shared sense of purpose (or lack thereof). While InsuCo members frequently engaged in constructions of “us and them” (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and

devalued the contributions of other organisational units, Burbage members were mutually engaged in the joint enterprise of creating a unique, authentic and successful play – therefore displaying characteristics of a productive community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

## Conclusions

### *Brief summary of the paper's findings*

The power relations that shape what is understood as “good” practice and “true” knowledge are a central feature of organisational practice that has been ignored for too long in KM research and practice. The purpose of this paper was therefore to engage KM researchers and practitioners with Foucault's power/knowledge lens as a way of thinking about and recognising the central role of power in organisational knowledge cultures.

It was suggested that the resource-based, agential and causal view of power (power of A over B) is overextended in KM and, while useful in the analysis of specific episodes of power, casts a shadow on the structural aspects of power; its embeddedness in broader power/knowledge relations, re-configured via the micro-politics of individual and collective agencies. As illustrated in the two case examples, the study of power/knowledge dynamics provides a better understanding of:

1. the “regime of truth” in organisations and why particular knowledge may come to be accepted while other forms of knowledge are dismissed, neglected or marginalised; and
2. the ways in which new knowledge emerges through the interplay of different power/knowledge claims, embedded within different discourses that circulate around a particular topic.

The paper's findings highlight how these organisational power/knowledge relations shape the ways in which practitioners share, generate and use knowledge – not as disconnected “islands in the sea” but relationally and embedded within specific discursive practices that position the self and others. It is therefore argued that Foucault's power/knowledge lens offers a distinct contribution for KM research and practice in offering a way to see power not just as a constraining force but also – via discursive practice – as productive of different ways of collaborating and engaging with each other.

### *Limitations of the research and findings*

The two cases chosen as illustrative examples in this paper did not emerge from a comparative multiple-case study design but rather from separate studies. As a result, a theoretical replication logic predicting contrasting results (Yin, 2009) did not inform the data collection and analysis, therefore limiting the extent to which the findings can be generalised for theory building. This paper offered insights into the potential of the power/knowledge lens for KM research and practice in two empirical contexts. However, there is a need for future research, in a wider variety of institutional and professional contexts that works towards integrating the concept of power/knowledge with extant KM theory.

### *Implications for practitioners and researchers*

Foucault's power/knowledge lens provides a powerful tool for KM practitioners and researchers in that it channels attention to the organisational “regime of truth”, i.e. the authority relations that govern particular institutions. Unlike prevailing resource-based views of power, the Foucauldian perspective offers a relational view of power which KM researchers and practitioners can use to unpack power dynamics in their specific institutional and socio-cultural context.

While the resource-based view of power leads KM researchers to examine how actors mobilise knowledge to pursue their own interests and gain influence over others, the power/knowledge lens draws attention to the discursive practices by which power is enacted. This perspective contributes to the growing strand of practice-based thinking in

KM, which sees knowledge as situated, culturally and historically specific (Contu, 2013; Gherardi, 2000; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2003), offering an avenue to attend more explicitly to issues of power (Heizmann, 2011).

For KM professionals, it is important to understand prevailing discourses in their organisations to be able to design and “pitch” tools that will be accepted. Particular communities of practice (e.g. IT, accounting) will have particular authority structures (ways of determining what counts as “good” practice and “true” knowledge), and an understanding of these specifics is essential for the acceptance of any KM initiative.

However, Foucault’s power/lens also highlights that prevailing authority relations are not fixed and can be altered if KM professionals understand how to tap into the multiplicity of voices extant in their organisations. Indeed, in promoting transformational change KM professionals may wish to consider giving more prominence to particular voices that have previously been overlooked or marginalised, considering carefully in each instance how far prevailing authority relations can be stretched.

Finally, recognition of the dynamic and ongoing nature of discourse might also encourage KM practitioners to look “outside the box” of their own organisation. An understanding of organisational knowledge cultures as the products of discourses that extend far beyond organisational boundaries makes it possible to identify a wider range of discursive options for the development of effective KM strategies.

### *Possible areas for future research*

Arising from the previous discussion is an important area for future KM research: the need to develop a better understanding of how the communication practices of organisational members are connected to and constitutive of relations of power. For instance, the authors would encourage research on the ways in which communication practices trigger transformational change within the constraints of particular “regimes of truth”, i.e. how practitioners manage to “push” the boundaries of the knowledge cultures in which they operate to facilitate more effective knowledge sharing, generation and use. In addition, the studies’ findings point towards the need for a more in-depth exploration of the communication practices that promote constructions of collective identity (Hardy *et al.*, 2005) and joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998), as well as into the ways in which these practices allow organisational knowledge cultures to productively accommodate a multiplicity of voices and perspectives.

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