The venues of high tech prediction: Presenting the future at industry analyst conferences

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

This paper attempts to understand the apparent paradox that although industry analyst information technology (IT) predictions often turn out to be ‘wrong’, there appears no obvious decline in the number of predictions made, the appetite for this kind of knowledge, or the standing of those producing this kind of insight. This begs the following questions: How do industry analysts come up with predictions? Who or what is involved in their shaping? How do they establish their efficacy? How do they and others evaluate these predictions? And what value do they have for those who consume them? We have been able to examine these issues empirically through ethnographic study of one of the key interfaces between the production and consumption of predictions: the industry analyst conference. In departing from studies that foreground its ‘accuracy’, we describe how this knowledge is subject to more plural methods of evaluation and accountability concerning its utility. We show how industry analysts gauge the utility of their knowledge through interacting with and provoking reactions from conference audiences. We analyse these interactions not simply as a means to socialise this knowledge but as a space for the simultaneous production and validation of predictions and the role of the audience as offering a new form of ‘public proof’. We also describe how these conferences have led to a reshaping of the kinds of experts and expertise involved in producing and communicating this knowledge. Our material is based on interviews with a number of industry analysts and observations of the conferences of the leading industry analyst firm Gartner Inc.

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1. Introduction

An industry analyst at a large banking conference considering technological developments makes the prediction that within a few years a significant amount of the financial organisations present in the room would move from exchanging paper based invoices to predominantly electronic ones. The speaker works for the well-known industry analyst firm Gartner Inc. and his reason for making the claim appears simple: “My job as an analyst is to make predictions. If they come true”, he adds, no doubt for theatrical effect, “I get rich and famous. If they don’t, I lose my job” (interview, Malinverno). However not everyone at the conference seemed to agree: “Your predictions are worse and more difficult to understand than Nostradamus’s prophecies”, replied a banking executive. This kind of exchange is not unusual. Industry analyst predictions invoke a strong reaction across various forums. In an editorial on software security, a computer scientist writes: “Gartner’s prediction was far off base…This alone attests to how naïve whoever made this hideous prediction is. I, for one, think I would rather imagine a world in which there were no more Gartner Group predictions” (Schultz, 2003: 463).

What are we to make of the peculiar form of business knowledge known as the information technology (IT) prediction? What about the industry analyst firms who produce them? Virtually non-existent two or three decades earlier there are now several hundred such firms operating across the economy. The larger of these organisations will make predictions on a daily basis: “Each week, the top analyst firms will publish three or four hundred research reports” (Chapple, 2007). Is this impressive expansion, which has seen the assembling of an entire ‘prediction industry’, evidence of the growth of some special form of expertise able to predict the future? Whilst there is little systematic data surrounding just how these claims correspond to actual events, it is widely understood that a number will fail to live up to expectations (Bott, 2012; Leonhard, 2013). If the vignette above is anything to go by, then this could be quite a large number! Are we to dismiss these predictions as unfettered forms of knowledge (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 2002) and the firms who produce them as part of the “cultural machine that churns out ideas like there [is] no tomorrow” (Thrift, 2002: 19)? To do, we argue, would be to misconstrue this particular form of business knowledge.

Despite questions concerning their veracity there has been no let-up in the numbers of predictions made, the appetite for this kind of knowledge, or the standing of those who produce this insight. If anything, the reverse appears the case (Bernard & Gallupe, 2013; Sherden, 1998). This begs the question: how does one account for the growing attraction of a form of knowledge that, at face value, regularly turns out to be ‘wrong’ (cf. Evans, 2002, 2007)? Perhaps the assumption that a prediction relies on its accuracy to spread is too crude (Schnaars, 1989). Therefore we need to think more carefully about how industry analysts come up with these claims, who or what shapes them, how they persuade others of their efficacy, how they are evaluated, and the value people find in them.

An important factor in their spread, we argue, is the shift a couple of decades ago from the dissemination and communication of predictions as mostly a ‘literary activity’ (Fine, 2007) to one today where they are predominantly presented at specially designed industry conferences. This shift turns out to be important in building the acceptance of this knowledge. It also provides crucial insights into the distinctive forms of knowledge production and consumption at play here. To anticipate our argument, we find predictions to be less about forecasting the future and more about helping practitioners take immediate, practical choices (Mallard & Lakoff, 2011). As such, predictions are judged not solely with regard to accuracy but have become subject to more plural forms of accountability and evaluation such as their ‘utility’ for practitioners. This makes industry analysts highly dependent on understanding the responses their predictions generate at conferences. We show how they gauge the utility of their claims through interacting with and provoking reactions from audiences. We develop this argument by analysing these venues as a space for the simultaneous production and validation of predictions and the role of the audience as offering a new form of ‘public proof’ (Shapin, 1988).

This paper is organised as follows. We build the case for considering the spatial organisation of prediction work by discussing and integrating studies on industry conferences with that on the ‘social study of public demonstrations’. This is followed by our empirical material, which is based on interviews with industry analysts and observations of Gartner conferences over several years. In discussing this data, we show how these events have reshaped a number of key aspects of the industry analyst knowledge making process which includes reconfiguring the character and shape of the expertise producing these outputs, together with the format and content of actual predictions.
2. A new form of expertise?

Understanding the future is of utmost concern for organisations (Tsoukas & Shepherd, 2009). Shapin (2008) argues that recent years have seen the proliferation of new kinds of experts with the capacity if not to predict the future then at least to help others operate in and manage the conditions of high uncertainty that surround the world to come. Along similar lines, Fine (2007: 100) suggests that most societies will establish ‘ritual specialists’ whose responsibility it is to “explain what the morrow will bring”. Whilst there is a small but growing body of work that considers this form of future-oriented knowledge, we limit our attention to discussion of just three groups – meteorologists, financial analysts and economic forecasters – chosen because they provide important contrasts regarding the status, outcomes and forms of accountability surrounding industry analyst predictions.

2.1. Judging accuracy

Meteorologists are an apt case for analysing the problem of judging the accuracy of predictions. This is not simply because an analogy from 1988 likens Gartner analysts to the experts who plot the weather. “If managers were pilots, then Gartner Group would provide flight planning maps and the weather forecast. The pilot charts his or her course, but the maps provide the context” (Future Thinker, 1988: 31). It is because the work of meteorologists is ‘plagued by error’. As a result, Fine describes meteorologists as operating under a special kind of ‘scientific model’, where their claims about future events that are checked and evaluated as a matter of occupational routine (Fine, 2007). This is because lay people experience the weather in ways seldom found in the other sciences. They ‘demand’ to know whether predictions turn out as forecast. Meteorologists are thus forced to produce what Fine calls ‘verification statistics’ (Fine, 2006). This formal verification is crucial, he argues, for demonstrating the ‘legitimacy’ of this expertise (Fine, 2006).

In contrast to this formal type of knowledge production and evaluation, Knorr Cetina (2010, 2012) discusses the financial analysts who sell investment information to speculators in investment and trading markets.1 Knorr Cetina (2010) draws our attention to differences between natural scientific knowledge and the ‘information knowledge’ deployed by the financial analysts she studied trading in foreign exchange and security markets. Scientists deploy relatively stable forms of knowledge whose significance, once established, decays only slowly. In contrast, she argues that it is immediate news that drives investment decisions. There are no processes similar to those found in science that document “research results as true or at least as the best available knowledge” (Knorr Cetina (2010): 175). This is because, in her view, the accuracy of a financial prediction seemingly “does not matter all that much” (Knorr Cetina (2010): 182). It is the arrival of new data that “continually excites a market into further trading” (Knorr Cetina (2010): 182). People in these domains have little or no incentive to rake over old claims. The market is always looking forward to the “next piece of information” (Knorr Cetina (2010): 182).

Economic forecasters produce macroeconomic models predicting the future state of production and consumption. According to Evans (2002, 2007), the important features of predictions is not their accuracy but the unique and privileged space they create for discussion and interaction. The forecasts Evans studied were consumed in specially arranged ‘forecasting clubs’. The business executives attending these meeting were apparently “...not paying for the pseudo-precision of numerical predictions” but the “maintenance of a social space within which the consequences of policy choices can be examined” (2007: 697). Most subscribers seemingly appreciated the inherent uncertainty of predicting and were less interested in specific numbers. They were confident that the predictor “generally gets the important things right” (2007: 696), though they could at times challenge the direction of claims.

The IT predictions of Gartner and other industry analyst firms are not subject to the direct and formal science-like evaluation processes described by Fine (2006, 2007). Nor are they completely devoid of accountability in the way Knorr Cetina (2010) suggests. Indeed we are sceptical of Knorr Cetina’s (2010: 187) claim that modes of verification can be completely or simply “suppressed” or “turned off”. We thus argue the need for more complex understandings of the processes by which actors evaluate and build the acceptance of future oriented knowledge. We find useful in this regard Evans’ (2002, 2007) prompt to give greater

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1 Industry analysts have much in common with financial analysts. In founding his firm, for instance, Gideon Gartner drew on his previous Wall Street experiences where he had worked for the investment analyst firms E.F. Hutton and later Oppenheimer (Gartner, 2011).
attention to the space and occasion of a prediction. We develop this point through considering approaches to the spatial organisation of knowledge and public participation.

3. How venues provide for ‘public proof’: from witnessing to interaction

This paper shows how the venues where IT predictions are discussed are systematically organised to include external audiences in their construction and ratification. In doing this we find useful discussions from Science and Technology Studies on the role of the public in the evaluation of scientific and technological knowledge. We trace in particular a shift in initial interest in what has become called the ‘social study of public demonstrations’ (Marres, 2009; Rosental, 2013) by which publics are seen to move beyond simply observing knowledge production to more active engagement in its production.

Shapin (1988) has described how the invitation of the public into the private rooms of 17th Century scientists to witness live experiments was important for the spread of early scientific knowledge. It was significant because those observing the demonstrations could offer a ‘public evaluation’ or ‘public proof’ of what had gone on in these rooms. There are few thresholds as important as that between the public and private, Shapin argues, when it comes to the evaluation of knowledge. When outside we have to take on trust what is told to us by those with access to the inside. Yet once we cross the threshold, we no longer have to rely on what we have been told, but can judge for ourselves (see also Shapin & Schaffer, 1985).

We find useful Turner (2001) in this regard who, in the more contemporary example of consultancy or advice services, has similarly argued the need to have witnesses over an otherwise closed world, able to offer testimony to the efficacy of expertise. Preda (2009) discusses the private spaces deliberately laid out to foster exchange between experts and the public (and gives the examples of open kitchens, hospital wards, courtrooms etc., as places where the public can not only observe but also interact with experts going about their business). The desire to be observed and interact becomes particularly important when there are problems concerning the legitimacy of a professional group. Thus enhanced interaction across this threshold can be an attempt to ‘persuade’ or ‘attract’ followers to this expertise.

Barry (2001), talking generally about staged venues and public experiments, argues that not only observation but ‘interactivity’ has become a potent device in engaging audiences and legitimating technological expertise. Marres (2009) shows how a dependency has developed whereby experts rely on securing the active involvement of the public for the domestication of science and technology. Public forums she argues should not be seen simply as a mechanism for the ‘socialisation’ of knowledge but rather, because these venues have their own specific affordances, the reconfiguration of the knowledge and those things that surround its production and appropriation.

These points have relevance for how we conceive of industry analyst conferences. Attending such an event can be like glancing through a window into a private sphere. Or, for those running them, it can be a means of offering a public face to the outside. There is an embryonic literature on industry conferences or what has been called ‘dramaturgical presentations’ (Lampel & Meyer, 2008), the name given to describe the places where business people meet temporarily in large numbers to discuss matters pertinent to the shaping of technology and product markets. Scholars have begun to note the enhanced importance of business events for the production and circulation of ideas alongside the more established channels created by, for instance, management consultants (see Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001) and so-called ‘knowledge entrepreneurs’ (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 2001). The importance of these events is seen to stem from their ceremonial and affecting nature — how audiences can be seduced by or persuaded of the virtues and benefits of whatever is on show, often through highly charged ‘dramaturgical presentations’ (Garud, 2008). Others have noted their specific interactional features as they allow professionals from different organisational and geographical circumstances to interact at close quarters to share knowledge and experience etc. (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). What we want to focus on is how these venues are specifically organised to foster interactions between the experts and the audience and the consequences this has for our understanding of the cycle of the generation and exhaustion of new business ideas (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001).

Institutionalist writers within Organisation Studies have drawn attention to the circulation and uptake of particular ‘Management Fashions’ (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Discussion of ‘fashions’ and ‘bandwagon’ effects has criticised rational choice models of management. Institutional theorists have drawn attention to the role of particular visions in reducing uncertainty for technology developers and adopters regarding which of the vast array of potential organisational and technological innovations they should pursue. Thus
Swanson and Ramiller (1997: 460) highlight the importance of what they describe as ‘organising visions’ in producing an understanding of an innovation, in legitimating it and in mobilising the resources needed to realise it. A later paper suggests that these organising visions have a particular career (Ramiller & Swanson, 2003): they struggle to gain ascendance and eventually are displaced. These technological and organisational visions are thus “relatively transitory collective beliefs” (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999: 709). They help constitute temporary social spaces: the diverse communities of players bound up with a particular vision.

Pollock and Williams (2009, 2010, 2011) have found that not only are the numbers of industry analysts firms operating in the IT domain are increasing but that these actors have become highly prolific in the production of (often contrasting) visions and predictions. Suzuoki and Greenwood (2001) suggest that competition between knowledge producers intensifies the cycle of generation and exhaustion of new business ideas. Our study of the specific dynamics of the conference venue provides pointers to how this cycle operates. We highlight how Gartner has a limited period in which its knowledge can be deployed to ‘make a difference’ for its clients. Gartner needs to stay ahead of the game, to identify ideas which are on the up or becoming exhausted. Though Gartner may be a major player, it faces a continual battle to retain ‘cognitive authority’ (Pollock & Williams, 2015). Their success depends on a very fine line between calling something prematurely and being proved wrong by events and missing things or arriving late. We observed the creation of new arenas such as the ‘conference event’ in which industry analysts could calibrate their timing through simultaneously acquiring and validating knowledge.

4. Methods

Our analysis focuses upon Gartner Inc., which is one of a number of industry analyst firms formed in the late 1970s, including Computer Intelligence, Dataquest, Forrester, Input, International Data Corporation (IDC), Ovum and Yankee Group. Founded in 1979 by Gideon Gartner, the firm operates (almost exclusively) within the IT domain. Gartner followed an innovative pathway to become the largest player and has had a decisive impact on their the field of industry analysts (Hopkins, 2007). Gartner’s strap line is that it “wants to be involved in every IT decision” (interview, Thompson). It thus produces research to help executives in large organisations to understand emerging technological trends (Firth & Swanson, 2005), to help construct IT strategies, or to facilitate choices when procuring IT equipment and software (Burks, 2006). We note that whilst clients can receive and view these predictions as paper reports via email the trend today is to access them via the conference. It seems that rather than ‘read’ the research people nowadays appear to prefer to ‘watch and listen’ to it (e.g. there has been a movement from ‘eyes to ears’).

In terms of conducting fieldwork, the conferences offer unparalleled opportunities for empirical access in that they bring producers and consumers into close proximity for unstructured interactions (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). Studying conferences also helps disrupt the popular conception that predictions are constructed solely by individuals where their origin and evaluation can be put down to the vagaries of individual imagination and discretion (Guice, 1999). If this were true then there would have been little for us to study. Our fieldwork suggests that predictions result from more observable social and distributed processes. There are frequent interactions at the intersection between the production and use of this knowledge that contributes to its shaping. As we describe below, the creation of this form of knowledge is highly dependent on ‘feedback’. Thus its creation necessitates a high level of interaction and networking. These interactions are often mediated (through telephone, email or webinars) or take place in transient settings (industry conferences or workshops). This presents particular problems for traditional ethnographic research designs, located in particular moments and organisational settings. When observing these groups one often has the sense of never being in the right place at the right time (Law, 1994). To help overcome this we acknowledge Marcus’ (1995) point of the need to be ‘strategic’ during ethnography in order to capture phenomena that overflows the single site. This includes making explicit choices about the places to be studied. Influenced by provisional theoretical and empirical understandings about which sites and nexuses might be interesting as well as pragmatic exigencies we thus focused our attention on industry conferences.

2 As Huczynski (2006: 244) writes whilst talking about consultant presentations: “Not only do managers appear to prefer to be told things, rather than having to read them for themselves, but also they appear to place the responsibility on the speaker to entertain them while communicating the information”.

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The data gathering for the current study comprised attendance and observations of a number of industry analyst conferences and in-depth semi-structured interviews with industry analysts. We participated in 3 2-day conferences in London and carried out more than 60 h of observations. Whilst participant observation is a demanding and often intrusive form of research, these occasions turned out to be a particular fertile ground for research. Here we could observe the formal presentations made by analysts but also approach them informally afterwards. Since the meetings were run in a similar fashion to academic seminars it was easy to engage analysts in conversation or to simply hang around and listen whilst others quizzed them about the thinking behind predictions. We were also able to chat informally with other conference goers, take-part in various structured activities (lunches, roundtables, one-on-one chats with analysts etc.).

Whilst our paper foregrounds the ‘public’ aspect of this form of knowledge production and circulation, we recognise that there are elements of this knowledge production that occur in ‘private’ and which we did not have direct access to. We were not able to negotiate access to carry our internal observations at Gartner Inc. We did however conduct formal interviews to ask them about how predictions were shaped internally. We have conducted 15 interviews with industry analysts. We also interviewed a further 15 Gartner clients or those who consumed Gartner predictions in some form. Whilst the bulk of the interviews were face to face, a small number took place over the telephone. Some of the analysts were interviewed on more than one occasion. Our study is further informed and contextualised by our participation in more than a dozen ‘webinars’ organised and hosted by various analyst firms. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The collection of data at the conferences was facilitated by the service that Gartner offer to conference goers where it video records sessions and makes them available to participants after the event (for a further fee, of course). This meant we could re-listen to conference presentations whilst back in our university offices.

5. Dragging prediction work from the private to public arena: five elements

We organise our empirical material around what we identify as the five key elements involved in dragging prediction work from the private offices of the analyst firm to the public arena of the conference. This is a discussion of i) the establishment and extension of the conference ii) how the conference could reconfigure the kinds of expertise involved in prediction work as well iii) how predictions could be produced and where they could be discussed and communicated iv) how the conference allowed analysts the capacity to manage some of the contradictory demands related to prediction work and finally v) how the conference was used to be multiply interactions between those producing and consuming this knowledge to help in its validation.

5.1. Establish and extend the conference

Today the ‘conference’ and ‘prediction’ appear natural bedfellows. The discussion of predictions in conference spaces appears an obligatory move in setting up this form of knowledge as reliable and useful. But it was not always thus. The analyst conference is a relatively recent innovation. Up to a few decades ago, prediction work was predominantly a ‘literary affair’ (Fine, 2007) that involved the writing and dissemination of lengthy research style documents. It was one where the production and consumption of this knowledge was mostly separated. Reports would be read by clients back in the comfort of their own offices. Although they could telephone analysts to discuss the details of claims, they reportedly rarely did so (Gartner, 2014). The gradual erosion of the disjunction between those who produced and consumed this knowledge began to occur during the 1990s. Gartner (and others) moved to create an alternative model for the production and dissemination of this research.

Gartner’s founder Gideon Gartner talked of ‘ten innovations’ that set his firm apart from the established players of the time (see Pollock & Williams, 2015). The first of these innovations included the decision to stage conferences more frequently and on a much larger scale than had previously been the case. These early events were relatively modest compared to those today but they quickly began to gather status and attract a following. Gideon Gartner describes how the first conferences grew to become what today is called the ‘Gartner Symposium’ or ‘The Symposium’ as it is known more widely:

…but we had events every once in a while. In those days, we had very few events but we innovated dramatically in our events. I have I think one story of one little innovation that we did, but you know the Gartner Symposium today is my design [and] at every step I improved the design, I modified it.
But at all times the press felt it was a leading innovator in designing new forms of how you present information at meetings (interview, Gideon Gartner).

What Gartner sought to do was define the nature of the conference venue where they would publicly discuss a form of prediction called the ‘5-year scenario’ and then later ‘Strategic Planning Assumptions’. This space did not as yet exist; it had to be created. He recounts how in setting up the conference he borrowed from existing domains like the ‘World Economic Forum’:

I designed a replacement for our initial conference format which presented 5-year “scenarios” of each service sector. It listed the sector’s macro trends followed by key issues to be faced and of course our projections. We constantly improved but mainly expanded our format to include competitive challenges, new technologies to expect, and so forth. The point was to create an evolving structure which clients could get used to, and hopefully grow to love. I was most proud when once after attending the WEF (World Economic Forum) I was inspired to design yet a new format, this time called the Gartner Symposium, evolving again to be Gartner’s IT Expo (Gartner, 2014).

The Symposium attracted hundreds and thousands of IT professionals on a regular basis. It has become a fixed part of the industry calendar and an obligatory point of passage for managers and technology vendors alike. Former Gartner employee Kathy Kane describes its importance:

...little did we know at that time (when The Symposium was designed) that I...was part of something very big that would become a true ‘Industry Defining’ event and would carry so much clout and weight that it would bring in many, many luminaries, that at its height would attract over 13,000 people to Orlando plus over 500 exhibitors, that it would become an international brand with events in Japan, Australia, France, Spain, South Africa and other locations...that it would have a community of over 30,000 people annually... (reported in Gartner, 2014).

The conference has moved from the margins of what Gartner do to the centre. For instance, Gartner devotes an entire wing of its organisation to running events. Self-described as the ‘largest IT conference provider in the world’, Gartner Events will begin planning events several months in advance and will conduct them down to the last detail. These events are carried out in existing spaces (often luxurious hotels) especially modified for the purpose. It is not unusual for these firms to turn up and install their own sound and lighting systems (and in some case the ‘stage’ itself as well as other dramaturgical props) (interview, Drobik).

Once a particular conference is over this is not the end of it. Not by a long way. Stages and props will be dismantled and shipped to some other part of the world, as conferences are organised as recurring events in space and time. The Symposium (and the various connected summits, forums, workshops etc.) run throughout the year and the same conference can be recycled across geographies. An analyst at one of the events we attended describes how they managed this recycling process:

We will have a few months rest and then we begin to think about the next one. We have one in the States coming up, so we will heading over there to the US. So, quite a lot of the content we have here also appears in the US. But obviously dialled into a US based audience, and US examples and so on. And there are some new presentations just for that audience. So it is quite a workload to actually avoid the trap of old comfortable titles. You know, some of the messages are the same. But you have somebody who comes to an event and goes ‘I saw that slide last year’. And, ok...there would have to be cross checking (interview, Drobik).

3 Industry analyst conferences are attended by a number of key constituencies. These include Chief Information Officers (CIOs) planning organisational IT strategies, IT procurement teams choosing between multi-million pound workplace IT solutions, and company managers and employees wanting to learn more about the potential benefits of digital technologies for their business (Burks, 2006; Firth & Swanson, 2005). Technology vendors and investor analysts are also frequent attendees at analyst conferences (Snapp, 2013).

4 See Skov and Meier (2011) on the strategic importance of the industry event calendar and how entry into that calendar can create a particular conference as an obligatory point of passage.
We note how in tandem with the rise of the conference – or perhaps because of it – there has been a change in the character of the expertise within these firms and the format and content of predictions. Let us consider first the skills demanded by the conference.

5.2. Reconfiguring expertise: skilled in engaging the audience

During the early conferences, analysts would simply walk out onto stage, greet the audience, and then proceed to read from a previously prepared paper (interview, Levin). The audience would follow the talk by looking at a folder containing papers handed to them on registering for the conference:

When you were on stage you... didn’t have any PowerPoint or any kind of backing. Literally, everyone had a binder in front of them. It did have slides that were crafted in power point inside, full of notes, and you would basically say ‘now let’s turn now to page number 2’. And they would talk about it. Then they say ‘now let’s turn to page 3’. You know, some analysts would be all over it, ‘so now let’s go to page 20. Now back to page 7’. They would use it as a reference (interview, Levine).

Binders were a necessity because talks would cover complex technical detail: “…it would be very detailed: diagrams or architecture or whatever it was. And then a whole page of notes underneath it...[so] they were more like I suppose, academic notes” (interview, Levine). The present day conference could not be more different. The typical arrangement is one where an analyst is accompanied onto stage by very loud music (a kind of ‘Gartner rock’) and enthusiastically greets the (often very large) audience (numbers could vary between 15–20 and 4–5 thousand people at a time!). A talk is fast paced, supported by vibrant visual graphics and above all else ‘entertaining’ (Huczynski, 2006). Below, one of the author’s fieldwork diaries records the moment one of these conferences begin:

The large room full begins to fill up. There are over 300 people already in the room and more are piling in. The large screens placed around the room that had previously been listing ‘interesting facts’ now spring into life with quick changing dynamic images. The electronic music that had been looping in the background is now replaced by loud (extremely loud) rock music. The lights are dimmed. The audience begin to sit up in their chairs expecting something to happen. And here they are appearing on the especially prepared stage. Not the entertainers or musicians one might expect but the ‘Gartner analysts’. “We are the rock stars who will be on stage performing for you over the next couple of days”, says one Gartner analyst (Jim Davies), without any obvious trace of irony, as he opens up a two day conference in London. And the event begins... (fieldwork diary).

If in the past the work of the industry analyst was a literary activity, nowadays it is an event-based one, shaped by the affordances and demands of the conference space. One consequence is that the original analyst figure from the 1990s is being overtaken by a new kind of analyst able to perform on stage. Whilst we do not want to push this point too far – since not all analysts turn out to be good presenters, see below – there is a sense that the conference performance has become a key feature defining these experts. We discuss this by exploring what analysts themselves feel about the conference – how it can raise various forms of emotion, from passion through to fear – and then look at some of Gartner’s organisational mechanisms aimed at maximising and measuring performance on stage.

5.2.1. From ‘B-player’ to ‘star analyst’

Many presenters interviewed were enthusiastic about the conference. One analyst describes this vivdly: “It is something I love...[it] is one of the reasons I do [the job]. I love doing it” (interview, Ward Dutton). Others were more ambivalent, pointing to the demands it placed on their time: “Another thing we do a lot is writing presentations. One fifth of our time we stand on podiums in front of an audience. We do our own events. We do vendor events. I will conduct our London conference next year” (interview, Malinverno). Another makes a similar point, but also notes how the size of the audience can create added pressure. He recalls a recent conversation with non-analyst friends:

So they said ‘how many times do you present a year?’. And I said ‘maybe 60...times a year. At least once a week, up on my feet in front of an audience’. And they said: ‘it is like around a table with 10 people?’.
said: ‘oh yeah, it is small. And the big ones will be about...5,000’. They are like: ‘right, OK!’ So I said ‘you learn to conquer your fears in front of...5,000’. It is quite scary (interview, Thompson).

If in the past the analysts would build their reputation based on the quality and perceptiveness of their writing, nowadays it is stage performance that creates hierarchy. There are analysts reported to be ‘exceptional’ in this regard and then there are those seen as offering different sorts of skills. Let us start with the former:

We have got a couple of guys here who are really, really good. And Gartner charges some ridiculous fee. It charges something like $15,000...to have an analyst for a day. And the reason for that is generally the standard of presenting is quite high. And you want someone to talk about ERP for the day, and you want them to stand on a conference, you know, lectern and attract people in with the Gartner name, you will charge for it (interview, Thompson).

Another interviewee echoes this description:

...some are exceptionally good presenters, can hold an audience, can take a couple of simple concepts and spin them into something that is memorable and sits in people’s mind. The nature of the rigour of their research is pretty limited in some of those places. But again some of the...highest profile researchers in all industries are those that can get that concept right, that enables people to remember it, and buy into it, and follow it through (interview, Mitchell).

These analysts were good in constructing and communicating predictions, but apparently less concerned with the rigour demanded by this form of knowledge making.

This contrasts with a second category that whilst evidently well qualified to produce the research, purportedly lacked the capacities of their counterparts in other regards:

There are different sorts [of analysts]. So if I think of one of the analysts in my team, he is not very flamboyant, he is just a very, very thorough, rigorous analyst. You might say that he is a really solid ‘B-player’. But based on the thoroughness of what he does, rather than the presentation, kudos, or the nature of his writing, or being in the press, he is very well respected by the group of people that he serves. But that is just based on the thoroughness and rigour of his research. Again, a bit like some academics that are respected on their thoroughness or rigour but there is no real strong insight or blinding flash of light...They are a different type of researcher, not necessarily good and bad (interview, Mitchell).

Whilst careful not to denigrate either category, our informant points to a division emerging within this fledgling expertise. He contrasts the so called ‘B-Player’ with the rise of what has become known more widely ‘star analyst’ who is valued for their personal and charismatic qualities (Fincham, 2002). It seemingly did not matter that one group were less research oriented: it was just that they could perform better on stage and this catapulted them into the increasingly important public arenas of the analyst world, whilst relegating others to the private backroom spaces of the firm.

5.2.2. ‘I’m 20th best in Europe’

Individual analysts know very well on which side of the divide they sit. Each time they appear at conference the audience are handed evaluation forms and asked to rate the speaker according to their ‘performance’ and the ‘usefulness’ of the content presented (see Fig. 1). There is ample evidence to suggest that these evaluations matter. In one conference we attended, the presenter with the lowest feedback score was made to wear a red and white striped top hat – the conference was themed on a Dr Seuss book – for the remainder of the event as a very visible form of punishment.

Analyst evaluations go well beyond the theatre of the conference. Feedback is collated and made available throughout the firm, meaning that each analyst will know exactly where they stand in relation to colleagues in local and international offices:

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5 Conference organisers insist (politely but firmly) that these forms are filled in (and large queues form at the exit to auditoriums as people are pressed into quickly rating talks before they hurry off to grab a coffee before the next talk begins).
We stack rank every analyst, every conference, and at the end of the year they stack us top to bottom in terms of how we present. So you know exactly where you sit in terms of what the customers, the clients, the attendees have voted, giving you a score, a stack ranked score. So you know exactly on every event. You look where you are and see how your content was better than everyone else’s content. And your speaker score, which is your ability to present, and you can see over the years whether you got better or worse and how you are doing.’ (interview, Thompson).6

A poor showing at conference is important because it could determine whether analysts are invited back to present at future events.7 It could also influence progression within the firm (promotion) or access to company rewards (sabbaticals). It may even affect whether you remain in the firm (and we were told the story of an

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6 This particular interviewee, who we thought was a rather gifted presenter, turns out, on his own account, not to be “brilliant” within the firm but only “not bad”: “…somebody once asked me about presentation skills and presenting, and they said ‘you present quite well. And I said, ‘I am OK’. ‘I am about 20th best in Europe out of about 140 people…Worldwide I am probably in the top 50 out of the 700 analysts or so’. ‘That is very good’. I said, ‘no not really. Not in Gartner. In Gartner that is OK but it is not brilliant. I am not bad’” (interview, Thompson).

7 A Gartner analyst flags how past evaluations are important in choosing speakers: “We use surveys of last year’s and prospective delegates as to what topics are important, as well as delegate speaker evaluations” (Jeffrey Man, Gartner Blog). http://blogs.gartner.com/jeffrey_mann/2009/08/31/how-gartner-symposium-happens/. Accessed 12th August 2014.
otherwise gifted analyst who had recently left the profession because he could not ‘handle’, no matter how hard he tried, presenting in front of large audiences). We return to the issue of conference feedback in a moment but first we want to discuss how the conference began to reconfigure the format and content of predictions.

5.3. Reconfiguring the how and where of predictions

A further of the ‘ten innovations’ introduced by Gideon Gartner (Pollock & Williams, 2015) included changes to the research process. Analysts were given direction into ‘how’ and ‘where’ their research could be reported. Gideon Gartner promoted the use of simple formats. Gone were the ‘lengthy’, ‘academic’ style reports. From then on all documents were to be “very brief”. Gartner designed “a one page format which [all analysts] had to adhere to” (interview, Gideon Gartner). He also initiated a distinction between the types of research that was to be circulated as documents and that which would be discussed and communicated only at venues. This included predictions known as ‘Strategic Planning Assumptions’ that would become “primarily for conferences” (Gartner, 2010). Below we discuss why there were thought to be benefits to dividing research up in this way.

5.3.1. Strategic Planning Assumptions

Strategic Planning Assumptions (SPAs) are simple two-part-contrasts — as in ‘today’ versus ‘tomorrow’. Here the existing state of affairs is presented, supported by figures, which are then extrapolated forward 4 or 5 years into the future (see Fig. 2). It is perhaps no coincidence that two-part-contrasts have their history in the political rally where the personal virtues of a speaker have utmost importance (Grady & Potter, 1985). The two-part-contrast allows the presentation of potentially complex arguments in a way that is both easy for the presenter to convey and easy for the audience to remember.

If this first example speaks of a linear transition from one state to another then the second type of SPA is more complicated. An analyst describes to the audience the thinking behind the SPA:

A Strategic Planning Assumption essentially is an informed set of assumptions that Gartner is making about what is going to happen in the future. We try to make them very real by putting numbers behind them. We put a timeframe behind them. We basically use it as a ‘Stalking Horse’ to see whether or not the technologies and the business processes and the adopters that we see are clients are going through are actually aligning with that SPA (Fletcher, conference floor).

The notion of a ‘Stalking Horse’ is central in the construction of a prediction (Bernard & Gallupe, 2013). Gideon Gartner describes how the thinking behind the Stalking Horse was to create an “idea or concept which would then serve as a basis for further study...and inquiry...and discussion...perhaps finally resulting in an approved consensus view at our research meetings” (Gartner, 2014). It often happened that the presenter was Janus-faced when talking about the future. Analysts would flip between talking about the positive aspects of a technology to then discussing the difficulties that can exist around an otherwise optimistic projection (Tutton, 2011). Its presentation was seen as an occasion to provoke further enquiry and discussion and to solicit the opinion and experience of the audience (Gartner, 2014). For instance, one presenter listed some of the reasons why a prediction might come true and then went onto give reasons why it might not (see Fig. 3)!

This form of SPA is interesting because we found these formats to be deployed during the discussion of ‘mature’ technologies or where technologies had already extensively discussed at previous conferences. In terms of the latter, there may be adopters sitting in the audience who not only remember the prediction from previous years but who may have direct, perhaps negative, experience of attempting to get the technologies to work as promised. In taking different sides of an argument there was a visible attempt by presenters to assure the audience that they had deep knowledge and understanding and were not suppressing or ignorant of difficulties, but also to spark a discussion. This begs the question: if analysts were developing specific forms of research solely for the conference venue, what sorts of understanding were they attempting to build?

5.3.2. Reframing content: what to do on Monday?

Relevance is an important issue for this firm, so much so that it has reorganised much of its research process in order to construct particular kinds of insights. In producing Stalking Horses, the analysts were not attempting to simply brainstorm or invoke far-flung futures. They wanted to produce predictions that that
were ‘relevant and actionable’ (Montgomery & Weinberg, 1979 cited in Gartner, 2014). To unpack this further we discuss the internal research process and show how analysts, if wishing to make it to conference, were made to run the gauntlet so to speak. Before a new idea could see the light of day an analyst would have to submit it to colleagues in the same ‘Technology Group’, who would, in turn, provide comment. An analyst describes how a prediction could be subject to what appeared to be fierce internal critique:

There is a tough, disparate bricks [that]...block your prediction. All the people in your group, at least three of them have to comment. It then goes through your manager. The manager has to comment...Then it goes to basically randomly to three other analysts around...applications, and they have to comment. And the predictions often change quite a lot throughout this journey (interview, Malinverno).

There was comment also from those across the wider Research Community. This community allows you to:

...form your ideas, because when you come out with a prediction sometimes you just understand that either it is too risky, so you don’t want to stick your neck out; or, maybe it doesn’t make sense at all. You can only do it because maybe a colleague of yours has told you something which you didn’t know before. What Gartner is very good at is allowing all of this information to circulate freely (interview, Malinverno).

This form of peer review has an effect. It meant the analysts considered themselves to be highly “conservative” (interview, Thompson) and not wanting “to stick their necks out” (interview, Malinverno). They also rarely ignored the input of colleagues. To do so would mean that a prediction could be “blocked” and not make it to the conference. Various reasons were given as to why a prediction could be obstructed. It could be that it points to something that has already happened: “The vast majority of predictions that do not make it out is because...our predictions are not predictions. We state something that is true already. Or possibly that is too close and that is just a silly consequence of what is happening” (interview, Malinverno). Another is where analysts cannot characterise the projected change in a simple and clear way – as a two-part-contrast, for instance – or they “can’t quantify [it] properly” (interview, Malinverno).

Apparently, the “worst” critique that an analyst can receive, however, relates to its immediate utility and relevance to the conference goer. An analyst describes how when predictions are debated internally there is a strong pressure to develop research with practical implications:

So when we challenge each other internally, the key...question we are always asking...It’s a big trend...blah de blah de blah, cutting all of that out — what do we propose to do on Monday? ‘Oh, not

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**Digital Marketing Will be Marketing’s Priority for the Next Five Years**

**Today**
1.8 billion internet users and growing
Mobile advertising in the U.S. reached $877.2 million in 2010, up 138% from the $368 million spent in 2009.
Social CRM application spending reached $600 million in 2010. Marketing departments were more likely to launch social CRM projects than other departments in the same company.

**Tomorrow**
By 2014, 6.7 billion will be connected to the Internet.
By 2013, mobile marketing applications will influence over 15% of online sales.
By 2013, spending on social software to support sales, marketing and customer service processes will exceed $1 billion worldwide.
By 2015, Internet-supported social marketing processes will influence at least 80% of consumers’ discretionary spending.

Source: Gartner Conference Presentation

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Fig. 2. Today versus Tomorrow.
Source: Gartner Conference Presentation.
**Strategic Planning Assumption**

By 2015, 30% of Global 200 companies that focus on improving lead management processes will increase revenue 5% to 10% through better qualification, prioritization, distribution, augmentation, allocation, tracking and closing of leads from multiple lead-generation sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons why SPAs will be true:</th>
<th>Reasons why SPAs will be false:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Growing investment in BoB lead management technology and process</td>
<td>Tactical KPIs and basic lead mgmt. metrics still the norm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead mgmt. KPIs and analytics identified as spending priority for 2011</td>
<td>Multichannel lead management proving difficult to implement: &lt;20% success rate with &gt;3 channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multichannel lead management becoming a necessity in social, mobile, digital enabled world</td>
<td>Consolidation of lead management market, multiple vendor “packaging” options will delay the market</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gartner Conference Presentation
much. Doesn’t really have impact for 5 years. ‘Well, who cares then?’ It is not of any interest (interview, Thompson).

If a new ‘big trend’ has been identified but there is no immediate or practical outcome then it will not be presented:

Unless you tell me [the client] what to do on Monday when I go back to my office and talk to my boss about the event it is of no use. So we...might set the context [say] where it is going and this is the big trend or this is the direction, but the end of each page is basically the same. This is the action we are advising you to take. It has to be pretty much a couple of bullet points (interview, Thompson).

Predictions are meant to have practical consequences for the client. They should be structured in such a way that leads to the initiation of some kind of response, to help the client make a decision:

We are very driven by that, which does sort of focus your thinking a bit when you come to the end of it. The worst accusation you can have internally is ‘so what?’ which is the, ‘yeah, it is brilliant but ‘so what?’ Good point! I’m embarrassed. So what does this actually mean? So what does a customer actually do? (interview, Thompson).

The goal it seemed was to help participants to reframe the future from something distant and abstract to something close and actionable (Mallard & Lakoff, 2011). This focus on practical outcomes permeates all aspects of the conference and there are various rhetorical devices that ensured this requirement was visibly actioned. For instance, every presentation finishes with a slide titled “Actionable Advice” which includes a section on “What to do on Monday”, “What to do next month” and “What to do within the next year” (see Fig. 4).

5.4. Conference allows capacity to manage contradictory demands of prediction work

Envisioning what new computer architectures will look like in the next five years or which particular breed of marketing technology will emerge over a rival one is a highly uncertain business (Fine, 2007). Error is a common and inevitable aspect: “We sort of take for granted that we are going to be wrong”, says an analyst with many years of experience (interview, Malinverno).8 Just as some analysts are better on stage, there are also those better at avoiding or managing failure. It is relatively common, for instance, to see a caveat at the conference. One analyst begins his presentation by telling the audience not to hold him

Actionable Advice

**What to do on Monday:** Create a business-led team to determine the impact of mobile technology and Web 2.0 on your current e-commerce capabilities and CRM plans

**What to do next Month:** Answer the question “What’s in it for me?” from a customer perspective for each process

**What to do within the next year:** Engage vendors or resources who can quickly build capabilities for you in an iterative process. Be ready to stop or change any project.

Sources: Gartner Conference Presentation

![Fig. 4. Actionable Advice. Sources: Gartner Conference Presentation.](image-url)
accountable’ for anything he was about to say whilst another drew a parallel between his presentation and the work of ‘witches and fortune tellers’. These examples are meant to amuse as much as deal with the difficult task of discussing accuracy. But since a prediction could ‘fail’, many analysts had developed strategies to avoid the public perception of failure.

One of these strategies was to be ambiguous on stage. In order not to be left with difficulties further down the line, analysts were intentionally vague. This could be temporally (as in when it might happen) or specificity (what exactly is happening and to whom). Another practice was to revisit predictions at specific intervals (e.g., to try to get it right second time around). Thus, an analyst might decide not to simply wait a prediction out but recast it based on recent developments and further information. Talking about quantitative indicators, one analyst reveals how:

> It is never forecast and forget. Forecasts are continually refined. So we tend to update ours once every 6 months at the outside. For some of the more volatile areas, it is once a quarter. And it is like any set of forecasts, if you get it widely wrong, tune your heuristics based on how wrong you've been, so as your forecasts get more accurate over time by the nature of your tuning (interview, Mitchell).

Through an iterative process, the prediction is continually refined and relaunched so that it gradually becomes more accurate. Typically an analyst is pushed to revisit a claim every 3 or 4 months which coincides with the finishing of one conference and the planning for the next and at this point, the analyst would be contacted and asked to revisit the slides.

5.4.1. Conferences make it come true

A further aspect that could militate against error was the possibility, once presented, that a prediction could become true. Those interviewed often talked about how others would be swayed by what was said during the conference. The analyst discussed at the outset of this paper discussing electronic invoice adoption in banking describes how: “if we say... electronic invoice[ing in banking] will grow 20% in the next – I think I say 5 times in the next 3 years, which is spectacular – if I do that, quite a lot of vendors would invest in invoicing solutions. So, to some extent, it becomes a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy” (interview, Malinverno). This analyst was by no means unusual in stating it in this way. These experts are reflexively aware of how they can come to shape the things around them (Pollock & Williams, 2015). But do they really encourage the phenomenon? Not everyone believes this of course. Or perhaps they find that predictions can have uneven effects. The analyst discussing banking contradicts his earlier statement: “But nobody really listens to Gartner! I think there is a corner you turn in your life as an analyst in which, when you think you can drive the industry as opposed to predict. When they [technology vendors] say ‘we haven't gone into that yet’, you don’t” (interview, Malinverno).

5.5. Multiply interactions: build real time validations

In this final section we discuss the extraordinary enthusiasm for ‘interactivity’ at these events (Barry, 2001). All aspects of the conferences appear designed to encourage exchanges between presenters and the audience (c.f. Preda, 2009). Gartner expect the audience to participate in the proceedings, rather than simply play the role of passive observer. We give two examples of the kinds of interactions that go on.

5.5.1. Hands up!

When presenting an SPA an analyst would almost always seek confirmation from the audience about its validity. An analyst sets out a two-part-contrast and then invites the audience to agree or disagree with what he is saying:

> I want to put two statements to you today and see if you agree with me. In 2 years time more than 35% of all customer service interactions will be via self-service. Currently it is around 20%... those of you

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9 Recounting a recent Reuters press release, he tells the audience how: “a month after the authorities began taxing Romania’s witches and fortune tellers on their trade, [the Romanian] parliament is considering a new bill that would subject them to fines or even prison if their predictions do not come true” (Maoz, conference floor).
that disagree with 35%. You think it will be lower? Put any hands up. Those who think it will be more? (Jacobs, conference floor).

The key method of creating an interaction was for the analyst to ask for the raising of hands – usually encouraged by the analyst first who raising their own hand – and then (in a somewhat theatrical manner) to scan the room, counting out loud to demonstrate that the audience view is being registered. If fewer hands are raised than anticipated then what ensues is something like the scene from an auction where the level of anticipated change is negotiated up or down: “Ok. 50% [of hands raised]?...Fine! So I am more or less in the ballpark there. Bottom line there is that there is a huge push of transactions towards self-service” (Jacobs, conference floor). The analyst attempts to create the audience as interaction partners and flags the possibility that they might revise a prediction based on feedback. It is the audience who either confirms or denies the claim being made. What this points to is how the conference allows not simply for the communication of this knowledge but also its validation. This interactivity-aided knowledge validation is perhaps not new in the world of prediction making but we would argue that it is being made anew. This is seen most clearly in this second example where we see the development of a novel dramaturgical template borrowed from another area of socio-cultural activity.

5.5.2. Game Show

The Game Show is the latest innovation within the conference. We witnessed it on some of its first ever outings. An analyst talks about how and why they came up with this particular format:

I sat there with my colleague, because the two of us chair the conference, and we were...very worried...we had to do a panel, because we have to have our sponsors on stage. It is part of the package we sell for the vendors sponsoring the event, the Events organisation were organising that. We were bored sitting there interviewing 3 sponsors. It was just dull! So we did it like a ‘Game Show’ instead. We were like, ‘this is not going to fly’! We were meticulous in our planning and the organisation and execution and it worked really well. It went down a storm, and they loved it, the audience. We were like: ‘we got away with it!’ (Thompson, interview).

The idea of the Game Show was to contrast the opinions of the different actors present: the analysts, the conference sponsors and audience. An analyst compèring describes this format to the audience:

In a minute, I am going to invite up our 4 premier sponsors who will form a panel for us. And what we are going to do is...give them 30 seconds to think about the answer to...8 questions...They are going to write their answers on a board. They are going to turn them around without conferring...And we are going to see how they have answered the questions. Then we are going to see if there are any difference in their questions. We may ask you [the audience] what you think. And then we are going to show you what the analysts think...there are no wrong and right answers. So this is all looking futuristically, looking out into the future (Davis, conference floor).

The game starts and the panel of conference sponsors are asked: “What percentage of sales marketing and customer service processes will be executed on a mobile device in 2015?” The panellists are more or less in agreement that there will be a large-scale shift towards mobile use (more than a 60% shift). The compère then reveals what the analysts think (only a 20% shift): “And the analyst view to compare that against. Much, much, much lower....Yeah we [the analysts] are a lot more cynical, pessimistic maybe” (Davis, conference floor). The compère then turns to the audience, who have been given coloured voting cards and asks them to decide who they agree with “...if we do red is pessimistic and green is more positive like our panellists. I would like a vote...are you with the Gartner analysts in terms of score?...Are we down in the 20, 30% range. Or are we more positive with the greens. Hands up now. Vote now” (Davis, conference floor). The bulk of the audience agree with the panellists, to which the compère shouts “The panelists win!

10 The conference sponsors were contractually entitled to “floor time” but had previously just used this time as a ‘sales pitch’ for their products, which, from the point of view the organisers, did not “fit” with the rest of the conference. Since their participation could not be dispensed with, the analysts came up with a format to funnel their input in an alternative direction. See Simakova (2013) for a discussion of the role of corporate sponsors at industry conferences.
The panelists win! I think that is about 70% I would say. 80% green. You’re with the panelists! The analysts are too negative” (Davis, conference floor).

The quiz moves on and a similar response emerges once again, such that the compère begins to mock the position of the analysts: “What did the analysts think? We thought ‘C’, completely different, on average! So having established in Track 2 that the analysts are lunatics” (Davis, conference floor). A pattern in the game begins to be established: “Oh, that is excellent. That is really confusing. I would say that that is mostly green. There is not much yellow…analysts are lunatics. Let’s see what the lunatics thought” (Davis, conference floor). The analysts are established as mavericks: “Once again we are pessimistic. A little bit conservative”. Another question: “The analysts think 15%”. “Pessimists again”. The compère closes the Game Show: “What we have learnt from this is that the panelists are very optimistic. You [the audience] are very optimistic and positive. The analysts are cynical, sarcastic and unpleasant individuals but we knew that anyway” (Davis, conference floor).

What are we to make of this? Is this just entertainment? Or does it demonstrate something else? The temptation, which should be resisted, is to dismiss it as a frivolous event—a bit of fun or entertainment. Clearly, there is a humorous element as the analysts play something of the role of ‘court jester’ (see Välikangas and Sevón (2010) for a discussion of consultants as ‘jesters’) and set about a rather self-deprecating performance of how opinions differ. Yet there are reasons why we should take it seriously. The Game Show certainly carried with it a sense of indiscipline that was quite unlike the other (more tightly choreographed) parts of the conference. The analysts hardly had full control of events. There was a risk. They did not know what the audience or sponsor reaction might be. It could have been a failure. Indeed, it was not clear what constituted success or failure in this context. The aims appeared rather open-ended. Once finished there was a visible sense of relief on stage that the analysts had indeed “got away with it” (Thompson, interview). All but the most minor things the analysts had predicted had been contradicted and in the most public of circumstances. Yet seemingly, it was not deemed a disaster. Rather, according to the analyst above, it “went down a storm” so much so that Gartner now regularly run the Game Show at other conferences (Thompson, interview).

6. Discussion: from paper to stage

Our aim has been to make sense of a pervasive but complex form of business knowledge known as the ‘IT prediction’. Whilst these future oriented statements regularly turn out to be ‘wrong’, this seemingly makes little difference to their uptake, the interest they attract, or the authority of those who produce them (Bott, 2012; Leonhard, 2013). What we have attempted to investigate is how, if the continued growth of IT predictions is not fuelled by their veracity, we might explain their spread. We have been interested in the processes by which industry analysts come up with predictions, the people and practices involved in their shaping, how they and others evaluate and establish the efficacy of this knowledge, and the value it has for those who consume it. To help throw light on this we have focused attention on the venues where this knowledge is presented and discussed. We have attempted to link the widespread circulation of predictions to the decision by the pioneering analyst firm Gartner Inc. to set up and run conferences and to dedicate the development of certain kinds of research and processes to these venues. This move turned out to be crucial.

In shifting predictions from paper to the stage, Gideon Gartner got around the problem of ‘failing’ predictions by making it a problem of ‘geography’. He shifted this particular form of knowledge making from the circulation of paper to direct engagement at the venue. Siting prediction work in physical venues meant that a number of activities from then on were carried out in public as opposed to back in the private offices of the analyst firm. These events were not simply an add-on to the prediction. They were capitalised upon to become an integral part of the prediction process. We find, today, there is a specific interactional and locational aspect to the conference. It forms a particular form of engagement between those who produce and consume predictions. Those constructing predictions were brought together for sustained and intensive periods of time with those potentially using them. The analyst firm could then use these spaces to set out and promote claims and utilise the audience to help in guiding choices about the kinds of predictions made.

11 Occasionally the compère would note a lack of consensus amongst the analysts about a particular claim or that not all of them were negative: “If you look at the analyst view here there are two analysts that stand out. One is Michael Maoz and Adam Sarner again. So at least 2 of the 15 of us agree with you. That is a starting point (Davis, Conference floor)”.

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In making these arguments, we have drawn on growing scholarship on the ‘social study of public demonstrations’ (Marres, 2009; Rosental, 2013). In particular, Shapin’s (1988) analysis of how the public, invited into early scientific events, were not the mere audience for knowledge but had become an integral aspect in its spread through offering a ‘public evaluation’ or ‘public proof’ of claims made. Shapin argued that early public demonstrations allowed processes traditionally thought to be distinct – namely, the production and validation of knowledge – to be carried out in the same space. We have sought to develop the idea of public proof through foregrounding the notion of ‘interaction’ (which is more active than the rather passive notion of ‘witnessing’ found in Shapin’s work). Industry analyst conferences are analysed as venues to engage (Barry, 2001). They are what Marres (2009) calls ‘engagement devices’ that secure the involvement and contribution of the audience. We have developed a number of points in relation to this.

The conference was important, we argue, because it promoted confidence and acceptance of this knowledge. It promoted confidence because the analysts were simultaneously stating and legitimating knowledge. These venues were deliberately organised to encourage the audience to discuss and evaluate the knowledge presented. Predictions formats were structured in such a way as to provoke a response. The complex academic style prediction (“now turn to page...”) has given way to new formats which are easier to deliver and easier to remember. The simple two-part-contrast meant the audience could take a position (“those who disagree... put hands up”). Novel templates – like the Game Show – were deployed to foster reactions from the audience (“are you with the Gartner analysts?”). On leaving the auditorium participants were invited to rate the performance of the speaker and asked if they found the talk and the content ‘useful’.

We are arguing that the value and confidence in predictions has become inextricably tied to the conference. This begs the question where does the value and validity of the conference come from. Dragging prediction work from the private backroom offices of the analyst firm to the public domain of the conference space also led to a shift in the character and form of the fledgling expertise producing this knowledge. At the birth of the industry, these experts were identified according to traditional ‘research’ characteristics. Nowadays different qualities have come to the fore. The ‘personal’ and ‘charismatic’ have become as important as the once celebrated notions of ‘thoroughness’ and ‘rigour’. It is no longer enough for analysts to be ‘respected’; these experts must also be invested with charismatic features (Fincham, 2002; Shapin, 2008). The authority of these experts is tied to their performance on stage. All analysts can produce research, but not all are flamboyant, talented, able to turn a phrase, etc. It is also entirely feasible for people to ‘read’ these predictions back in their offices but today they predominately insist on ‘watching’ and ‘listening’ to them, through attending the conference. This is because, argues Shapin (2008), when people are confronted with or are forced to make decisions in contexts of high uncertainty, it is ‘judgement’ that comes to the fore. In exercising judgement, it is personal and familiar qualities that become important in evaluating and making sense of knowledge. And whilst the personal and charismatic can be exercised by repute or at a distance through documentation, it is more powerfully exercised inter-personally and through co-location.

Importantly, whereas in the past these analysts were accomplished in engaging the data today they are skilled in engaging the audience. Presented at close quarters with the charismatic figure, the audience were encouraged into reacting and contributing (cf. Barry, 2001), to provide much needed feedback. Contrast this with the situation from just a few years earlier (the ‘literary model’) where there was a disjunction between the analyst and the client, between production and consumption, and between the production and assessment of this research. Not only was knowledge produced mostly ‘in private’ but also there were few mechanisms or occasions to solicit input on claims. The feedback so crucial for this process of evaluation would arrive slowly and sporadically (if it arrived at all). This had problematic implications for a knowledge producer dependent on understanding the public reaction to its claims (Were people in agreement with what was being said? Did they find it useful?).12

We further suggest that participants at the conference were validating knowledge and also contributing to its production. There is no better example of this than the Game Show. Initially, as we sat and watched this (rather bizarre) episode, we struggled to make sense of it. Later we realised that we were being given an important glimpse into how this form of knowledge production could sustain itself. The organisers were creating a number of future oriented tropes (‘Stalking Horses’) to draw in the audience, and then asking people to align or disagree with them. And what better way to test an idea than to contrive an entertaining experiment

12 See Czarniawska-Joerges (2011: 182) discussion of the problems that News Agencies undergo because they do not receive regular feedback from audiences.
wholly about generating a reaction and augmenting the level of audience feedback. We thus came to see it as an important mechanism by which interactions could be ‘multiplied’ (Shapin & Schaffer, 1985). It offered further opportunities to include those from outside in this prediction work, allowing Gartner to simultaneously produce and test its predictions in real time, in the relatively protected space it had created for itself. The Game Show allowed a mutual (but not necessarily antagonistic) probing of each other’s point of view (and the drama and humour of the event clearly helped Gartner create this protected space).

Building on Shapin (1988), we argue that conferences are significant in the evaluation of knowledge because they make things visible and accountable. The use of dramaturgical templates like the Game Show, the Stalking Horse, the hands up interactions were not just entertainment or bureaucracy but provided for various forms of accountability and legitimisation. Our interest here is how presenters could be held to account by various communities – the audience raising hands or filling in evaluation forms, the internal analyst organisation collating these forms, colleagues in the peer review process ‘blocking’ predictions, and so on – and also, in turn, how being held accountable begins to shape what an analyst says or does whilst on stage. We were struck by how these charismatic specialists could on the one hand excel in front of an audience but on the other, also be cautious and afraid to “stick their necks out” (interview, Malinverno) for fear of distancing themselves from the opinions of colleagues or people present. Foregrounding these more ‘plural’ modes of accountability also allows us to problematise assumptions that present predictions as unfettered or unbridled forms of knowledge (Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 2002; Thrift, 2002). In her work on financial analyst forecasts Knorr Cetina writes that “[t]here appears to be no process of consensus formation that would result in a community-wide recognition and validation of knowledge claims – no process that ‘certifies’ research results as true or at least as the best available knowledge” (2010: 75). We are sceptical of the suggestion that a body of knowledge can be completely free of any form of assessment when our own fieldwork (on a related body of expertise) detected a rather complex ecology of accountability and verification that could establish confidence around these claims – what might be thought of as a ‘validation regime’.

We do not think it an exaggeration to suggest that not only does the audience actively participate in the production and verification of these predictions, but also to a certain extent, their reaction at the conference is the object of investigation. We noted how, during the conference, analysts would attend the talks of colleagues. Their involvement, it seems, was not just to listen to the speaker but to watch the audience. Moreover, such was the importance of taking notice of and accounting for audience feedback that it had become a key element of the internal research process. For instance, it was acknowledged by analysts that not all their colleagues’ predictions were good ones. Whilst all analysts could produce research, not everyone had the capacities to produce the right kind of claims. Exposing ideas as early and frequently to conference audiences was therefore seen to be one remedy for these limitations. Transforming analyst opinion into what was seen as robust knowledge in this domain was to be via the conference. Indeed, today, in these venues, it is far from clear who are the creators of predictions and who are the audiences for this promissory work. To understand this point fully we need to say more about what is being evaluated during internal peer review and at conference.

The events where predictions are communicated have become part of a ‘circuit’ (Thrift, 2005) with the same or similar conferences repeated at different locations and times throughout the year. This meant that the predictions could be constantly tested and updated at each event. What was being improved over the series of conference events, and what was ultimately being evaluated by the audience, was not the verisimilitude of the prediction but its potential to stimulate ‘activities’. In setting up his firm, Gartner adopted

13 Balnaves et al. (2011), writing in the context of media ratings, see audience surveys as a form of ‘audit’ or offering a type of ‘accountability’. As they see it, audience ratings have become a form of ‘currency’ which decision makers use to publicly demonstrate success and to justify choices. Ratings are also used to analyse and shape current offerings through identifying areas of weakness.

14 We use the term ‘validation regime’ to highlight the argument that the processes and content of industry analyst knowledge are closely related to the features of the epistemic system in which it is generated, circulated and consumed, and in the process legitimated with particular internal and external audiences and subject to various forms of verification and test (Pollock & Williams, 2015).

15 An interesting feature of this knowledge is that it is the conferences and not the predictions that circulate. Because conferences are organised with a view to being reproduced in time and space, and predictions depend on these venues, this means that they have become the primary vehicle for the distribution of this form of knowledge. This contrasts with discussions within Science and Technology Studies – such as Bruno Latour’s ‘immutable mobile’ (1987) and ‘circuiting reference’ ((1999) concepts – on how knowledge might escape its locality. In discussing these ideas, Latour backgrounds the local features or contestuality of knowledge and foregrounds instead the conditions that allow for its effective travel. By contrast, we would argue that it is precisely these contextual aspects that allow this knowledge to move so effectively.
and applied ideas from decision theory (Montgomery & Weinberg, 1979). He purposely reconfigured his outputs from research as a process of reflection to research as a process of action. Thus when a prediction is developed before the conference, thought is given to how it must challenge conventional thinking: it must be ‘provocative’ (a ‘Stalking Horse’ to use Gideon Gartner’s suggestive term). More importantly, it must also be relevant and actionable (Nilsson & Helgesson, 2015). And just as we seem unlikely to evaluate the activity of swimming or running as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ (du Gay, 2010), the audience appears not to want to decide about predictions in the same way. A successful prediction in this context was one that could present the future not only as an object for reflection but of immediate intervention (du Gay, 2010). The prediction should put contours on imminent change and tell the audience what to do once they are back in their offices ‘on Monday’. Hence, every conference session finishes with the slide: “What to do now”, “What to do next month”, “What to do next year” etc.

This discussion of the prediction as a form of intervention brings us to the final example where knowledge claims are simultaneously reported and enacted. Predictions are meant to be descriptions of the world. Indeed the weather forecasts described by Fine (2007) are just that. No matter how confident one is about a weather forecast this will not make any difference to how the actual weather plays out. But this static view of the prediction does not hold in all contexts. Industry analysts’ present IT predictions with the explicit understanding that what is said on stage may go on to alter what those sitting in the audience do once they leave the confines of the conference venue. If an analyst says that a specific technology will grow, technology vendors in the audience, on hearing that prediction, may then invest in that type of solution and the technology will indeed grow as predicted. It follows that the analysts often know that what they say will be correct because, in many respects, they are “actually influencing what is coming next” (Mitchell, interview). This form of enactment provides striking evidence of the further erosion of the disjunction between the production and validation of this knowledge. It is not only that activities at the conference occur in the same space they also regularly happen in the same timeframe. That is, it counters the assumption of a distinct temporal break between the stating of a prediction and acceptance of that claim. We expect things to stay the same long enough to decide whether they have turned out as projected (and not for the prediction to provoke the actual change before we have had the opportunity to evaluate if this is the case or not). But these venues of prediction make these assumptions (and disjunctions) increasingly hard to sustain.

6.1. Conclusions: predictions don’t travel (as well) without conferences

It is the conference that breaks the ice between the production and consumption of this very particular form of business knowledge. Predictions are seldom launched into the ether or left to their own devices. Through the extension of the conference, there is a continual and simultaneous process of production and validation in operation, the stating of a claim and the provoking of a reaction first at one conference and then another. These predictions do not result from some special form of expertise but are the culmination of this cycle where public feedback is sought and included right from the outset (see Hennion (1989) who makes this point about a further type of art form, music). If there was any further doubt that taking the conference as our point of entry was advantageous we need only note the interactions created and organised by the analysts themselves. These kinds of predictions require no legitimation other than the audience reaction (these real-time hands up interactions provide all the information needed). The analysts deliberately open a window onto their research process and do not seem put off when the reaction is negative or, when having tried things out, the scores on the evaluation forms come back low. This is because this is the best way to see (and literally ‘seeing’ the audience reaction turns out to be the thing desired) whether the prediction is any “good”, whether it is “memorable” and “sits in peoples mind”, such that clients “buy into it and follow it through” (interview, Mitchell). It is not that audiences are invited into these conferences simply to witness knowledge or validate as Shapin (1988) might put it). There is a ‘public demonstration’ but it is the public and not just the prediction that is on show. They are not just ‘witnesses’ but actors just off stage so to speak (the public is the ‘proof’). The analysts today are permanently obliged to take account of audience opinion. The experienced and charismatic analyst will know how to create a public reaction. They cannot prove their work without first going through the process of provoking and capturing agreement at the conference. It is not enough to provoke sentiment; they have to demonstrate (to peers and managers) that they have the public with them. The various aspects of the notion of public interaction developed here need to be studied symmetrically. The incorporation of the public into a
prediction is the same whether we are talking about its production or circulation. There is little difference between provoking public sentiment to validate the production of a prediction and provoking public opinion to help in the circulation of a prediction. In other words, the simultaneous production and consumption of predictions must be analysed together, and not as disjointed phases, which would inhibit our understanding of either one. The conference provides such a setting and we would thus commend its study.

References


