

THE ILLUSION OF DIFFUSION

Joel Best

The Six Stages of a Project" is a bit of office folklore that has been around for decades in many versions. This little piece of folk wisdom describes a cyclical—and cynical—process by which organizational innovations rise and fall. The six stages are as follows: (1) Wild Enthusiasm, (2) Disillusionment, (3) Total Confusion, (4) Search for the Guilty, (5) Persecution of the Innocent, and (6) Praise and Honor for the Non-Participants.

This process is my subject. Anyone who follows the news can spot examples of institutions becoming caught up in short-term enthusiasms:

- Although psychiatrists first described multiple-personality disorder in 1791, it remained an exceedingly rare diagnosis. In the half-century before 1972, less than a dozen cases were reported, but during the 1980s, psychiatrists diagnosed thousands of cases. And, where early cases almost always involved patients with only two personalities, the 1980s cases often had dozens of "alters." Diagnoses have since fallen off. The 1980s epidemic of MPD was a medical fad.
- During the 1970s and 1980s, business analysts worried that the Japanese economy was growing at a faster pace than that of the U.S. Some suggested that Americans needed to understand and adopt Japanese business practices. In particular, hundreds of U.S. corporations announced that they would establish quality circles where workers and managers could discuss ways to improve operations. Within a few years, quality circles had fallen out of favor; they had proven to be another management fad.
- In 1989, there was great excitement when two University of Utah researchers declared that they had produced a cold fusion reaction in their laboratory. This inspired considerable scientific activity around the world, while media commentators speculated about the revolutionary impact this new source of cheap energy would have. Alas, the researchers' results could not be replicated,

and cold fusion is recalled as a short-lived scientific fad.

Psychiatrists, managers, and scientists are serious people, yet these are three cases where serious people bought into what turned out to be short-term enthusiasms. There are many other examples. Universities, for example, are scenes of intellectual fads, as well as fads in teaching methods, curriculum design, and administrative practices. Although my examples come from the 1980s, this does not mean that the 1980s were some sort of peculiar, fad-infested decade. Rather, it takes time for a fad to collapse, for its short-lived nature to become apparent. Anyone who follows the news can be forgiven for suspecting that the more recent fascinations with Six Sigma management techniques, assessment in higher education, or standardized testing to achieve educational accountability may seem a little odd ten years from now.

Fads in medicine, management, science, and education are what I call *institutional fads*—short-term enthusiasms that rise and fall within institutional settings. Sociologists who study fads tend to examine playful popular phenomena, usually associated with young people—toy fads (such as the hula-hoop), dance fads (such as the Macherana) or campus fads (such as streaking). Textbooks even define fads as "trivial," "trifling," or "insignificant," which may help explain why the subject hasn't attracted more researchers.

I want to shift the focus to—and argue for the importance of—institutional fads. Short-term enthusiasms do emerge—and fade—among serious people, as anyone who has spent much time in business, education, or other similar institutions can testify. These fads are consequential: they affect what people do, consume their time and money, and— as "The Six Stages of a Project" suggests— foster a sense of alienation. So, it is worth asking: Why do serious people buy into silly enthusiasms?

In order to answer this question, we need to begin by examining the dynamics of fads. Let's consider what we might think of as the natural history of a typical fad. In the typical fad, there is initially little interest in the novelty, then its popularity rises quickly until it peaks,

and then it drops off again. If we graphed this, using some measure of popularity for the vertical axis, and time on the horizontal axis, we'd wind up with something that looks like those normal curves beloved by statisticians. We can draw essentially the same graph for any fad, because these contours define the fad: a fad is a short-lived enthusiasm. Fads do not last, which is the main reason we assume that they aren't important.

But consider the results of what may have been the first sociological study of fads. Each year between about 1915 and 1924, the sociologist Emory Bogardus asked about a hundred people to name five current fads. Not surprisingly, he found that most of the items named did not last long enough to make more than one list; only a few fads received mention in three successive years. One of these was: "men's wristwatches."

How could Bogardus's respondents have mistaken wristwatches for a fad? Looking back, this seems like a foolish mistake. But when wristwatches first appeared, they were considered silly novelties; after all, the pocket watch and chain, suspended from the waistcoat, were as fundamental to proper male attire as the necktie. Bogardus's respondents called the wristwatch a fad because they didn't expect it to find lasting favor. Only now, knowing as we do, that the wristwatch has become—along with the wedding ring—one of the most popular forms of male jewelry, can we imagine what must have happened. Men must have discovered the wristwatch's advantages—that it was lighter, could be worn without a vest, and viewed without occupying a hand to remove it from its pocket and open its case. Knowing what we now know, we aren't surprised that wristwatches endured; in fact, we can only marvel that people once considered the wristwatch a fad.

Innovations—new products (like wristwatches) but also new ideas, new customs, all sorts of new things tend to spread slowly at first, then rapidly increase in popularity, before leveling off at some point where anyone likely to adopt the innovation has done so. This process is called diffusion, and it produces a familiar graph among social scientists: it is usually called the S-curve because of its shape. The S-curve is well known because it fits the diffusion histories of so many innovations—if you measure the spread of telephones, or televisions, or VCRs, or whatever, the resulting graph is usually an S-curve.

If we superimpose our two graphs—the one for fads, and the S-curve for diffusion, we see something interesting. The left side of each graph is essentially the same—in both cases, a few people adopt the novelty at first, then there's a rapid increase as lots of folks get involved, and then a gradual tapering to a peak. Up to

that point, there is essentially no difference between how fads (like hula-hoops) and things that will prove to be lasting innovations (like wristwatches) spread. It is, of course, what happens next that makes the difference—fads lose popularity, while lasting innovations remain popular.

Our wristwatch example reminds us of an important fact: Initially, during the period shown on the left-hand side of our graphs, people can't be sure whether a novelty will endure or fade. Oh, sometimes they have a pretty good idea: it is hard to imagine that many people expected hula-hoops to remain wildly popular, or thought that the telephone wouldn't last. But public opinion is often wrong—and two sorts of mistakes are possible. The first error, of course, is what happened when Bogardus's respondents dismissed the wristwatch, that is, people expect a novelty to be a fad, but it actually turns out to remain popular. The second mistake occurs when a novelty is heralded as the new new thing, but it turns out to be a bust. There are lots of examples—remember CB radios or 8-track tapes?

This uncertainty about the future, about whether a novelty will prove to be a fad or a lasting innovation, is key to understanding institutional fads. Serious people almost always reject the notion that their new enthusiasm is some sort of fad. The hallmark of the institutional fad is the conviction that, far from being a fad, this innovation represents progress, that it is an improvement that will prove worthwhile and endure. Remember: the front half of the classic fad curve looks just like the beginning of the S-curve of diffusion. When an innovation is spreading, no one can be sure whether it will be an enduring instance of diffusion, or fade as a forgotten fad. But the faithful, those who believe in this new thing, share a conviction that this will be a lasting change. Doubters are dismissed as unimaginative cynics or recalcitrant stick-in-the-muds who are blind to the future's possibilities. While the innovation is spreading, it is easy to believe, to dismiss the doubts. It is only later, after the enthusiasm has died down, that people recognize that this was, after all, just a fad, and that they experienced the illusion of diffusion.

How can we explain institutional fads? Here, it will help to think about three different levels of social arrangements that foster the adoption of innovations: I begin at the broadest level, by considering the meaning of change in American culture, then I examine how the organization of contemporary institutions fosters innovation, before finally exploring how adopting novelties can be in the interest of individual actors.

First, we need to recognize the ways that American culture supports innovation. A presumption of progress,