ORGANIZATIONAL ACTORHOOD AND THE MANAGEMENT OF PARADOX:

A VISUAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract
We extend the theorization of organizations as social actors to illuminate how external attributions of actorhood are made by the business media and how these attributions are associated with heightened environmental paradoxes confronting organizations. We analyze the visual depictions of organizations on 530 covers of an influential periodical, BusinessWeek (BW) magazine, over a 30-year period, 1978-2007. We present evidence that the visual depiction of organizational actorhood increased over time and that this depiction occurred more frequently in periods characterized by heightened paradoxical tensions in the business environment. Moreover, we find that in these periods, there is a complementarity between the visual and verbal modes: verbal text highlights the oppositional nature of paradox while the visual image offers interpretations for the management of these tensions. Our work contributes to understanding how the visual construction of organizations by external audiences can position the organization’s standing as an actor, as well as the organization’s capabilities for action under conditions of environmental challenge.

Keywords
visual analysis, media images, social actor, paradox, organizational actorhood
Over time, scholars’ theorization of organizations has changed. Early formulations conceptualized organizations as relatively staid systems, consisting of internal structures, hierarchical designs, standardized routines, and decision-making capabilities that tended to be relatively insulated from environmental forces (e.g., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Thompson, 1967). Later formulations theorized organizations as more dynamic, open systems with capabilities to not only react to environmental forces but also act upon them.

This theoretical trajectory, from closed to open models, finds an apogee in recent conceptualizations of organizations as social actors (e.g., Meyer, 2010; Glynn & Watkiss, 2012; King, Felin & Whetten, 2010; King & Whetten, 2008; Scott & Meyer, 1994), i.e., human-like entities “authorized to engage in social intercourse as a collectivity and possessing rights and responsibilities as if the collectivity were a single individual” (Whetten & Mackey, 2002, p.395). Assigning actorhood to organizations anthropomorphizes and grants them personhood, in ways that emphasize their agency to act on their “legitimate collective authority” (Meyer, 2010: 2), as well as their legal standing as corporate persons, and beings apart from their individual members. And yet, although we have begun to examine organizations’ self-claims to actorhood (e.g., Bromley & Sharkey, 2017), we have little understanding of how “outside evaluators” (Davis, 2013) or external audiences construe organizations as actors in society. We seek to address this gap and do so by focusing on the visualization of organizations as actors by external audiences. The visual mode is particularly apt for examining organizational actorhood because it can capture the animation and complexities of actors (Guthey & Jackson, 2005), often better than other modalities, due, in part, to its higher polysemy. In addition, visual images have the capacity to convey multiple meanings, thereby evoking a variety of interpretations and feelings (e.g., Langer, 1953). For example, the visual can capture an array of diverse, multiple and even
seemingly contradictory meanings, and thereby capture paradox by building on both holistic and simultaneous signification (see, for example, Meyer et al., forthcoming). And, yet, this high capability for rich expression and polysemy, is also the inherent challenge of the visual. It can confound meaning and interpretation for the observer, with its complexity of meaning; one way of clarifying or stabilizing such meanings is to pair the visual image with verbal text, as is often done in business communications like advertisements or branding messages. In examining the visualization of the organization as a social actor, we thus sought to pair the visual with the verbal, using a multi-modal approach, in order to understand the interplay between the visual and verbal modes. Accordingly, we supplemented the media’s visualization of organizations as actors with the verbal text accompanying those images.

Our study is guided by two core research questions: 1) How does the business media visualize organizational actorhood, and how might this change over time? and, 2) How do visual images of organizational actorhood change in the context of heightened environmental challenges? To address these questions, we collected and analyzed the magazine covers of a popular periodical, *BusinessWeek*, over a 30-year period from 1978 to 2007, focusing on those covers that depicted organizations. We chose this time frame, consistent with other researchers (e.g., Meyer, 2016; Bromley & Sharkey, 2017), because the kinds and degree of environmental challenges that organizations were both heightened and varied; we reasoned that variation in environmental conditions would render more transparent any variations in the visualization of organizational actorhood.

We focused on a particularly challenging and salient aspect of the environment, that of paradox (e.g., Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2016; Schad, Lewis, Raisch & Smith, 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011), i.e., the concurrent existence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements,
that pull an organization in opposite directions (Cameron & Quinn, 1988). Paradoxical tensions have increased over time, especially since the 1990s (Meyer, 2016), as business environments became increasingly fragmented and pluralistic, with multiple competing market logics, and a growing presence of meta-organizations, i.e., large, complex, global umbrella associations, like the UN and the EU, having ambiguous identities and agendas (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Previous researchers have characterized the time period of our study (1978-2007) as having three distinct triggers associated with heightened paradox (Lewis, 2000; Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa & Tracey, forthcoming): 1) increased global competition, contrasting nationalism against internationalism; 2) demographic shifts in the workforce, that contrast masculinity and femininity; and 3) the advance of new technologies, that contrast reality and virtuality. Because paradox creates oppositional tensions that need to be managed (Lewis, 2000: 760), we theorized that in periods of heightened paradox, there would be increases in the visual depiction of organizational actorhood, along with its implications for organizational agency to address these tensions.

We focus on visual images because metaphorical anthropomorphism, often associated with more abstracted meanings, is better understood nonverbally (Giorgi & Glynn, 2015); because the visualization of a human likeness is the most direct representation of actorhood and can “convey a range of complex messages” (Davison, 2010: 169); and because the visual “provides a crucial and unique resource through which the unobservable, unknowable substances…take form and become, in the literal sense of the word, visible” (Höllerer, Jancsary, Meyer & Vettori, 2013: 141). Beyond the representational aspects of visual images, we also investigated their interpretive capabilities to direct attention to particular aspects of actorhood.
along with the possible organizational strategies of actions they implied (e.g., Höllerer, et al., 2013; Langer, 1953; Swidler, 1986).

Given the relatively nascent state of both the theorization of organizational actorhood and the empirical analysis of the visual mode, our approach is a significant first step to advance research in this direction. Our study first paints in broader strokes the general patterns in the media visualization of organizational actorhood over time, particularly during periods of heightened paradoxical tensions; to do this, we first conducted a longitudinal, quantitative analysis. Next, we qualitatively explore selected depictions of organizational actorhood under conditions of heightened paradoxical tensions simply to illustrate how these are visualized.

Our research makes several contributions. First, we demonstrate the potency of using the visual mode to capture organizational actorhood; we argue that visualization is particularly well-suited to accomplishing this with its pictorial ability to succinctly capture personhood. Accordingly, our work responds to calls to conduct visual analysis which “has remained largely unexplored in organization and management research” (Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary & Van Leeuwen, 2013: 490-491). We show how a pervasive visual image, a business magazine cover, connotes the organization as an animated actor and displays meaningful strategies for the organization to act upon given the paradoxical environmental challenges of the time.

Second, we expand research on organizational actorhood (e.g., Glynn & Watkiss, 2012; Scott & Meyer, 1994) because “not much effort has been made to explain the underlying assumptions of what it means [for an organization] to be an actor. … our organizational theories have weakly theorized the very unit of analysis that defines our domain of study” (King et al., 2010: 291). Importantly, our perspective is focused on construals of actorhood made by an external audience; thus, we offer a needed complement to extant studies which focus on
organizations’ self-construals of actorhood. We elaborate the social dimension in organizations’ social actorhood by using public media displays. If organizations are construed as actors to enable their engagement in “social intercourse” (Whetten & Mackey, 2002: 395), then we should look to instances of social intercourse to understand organizational actorhood. Cultural forms, such as magazine covers, give symbolic meaning to our world through the images they present in pictures and words (Johnson & Prijatel, 1999: 90). Organizational actorhood implies not only the organization’s standing or reputation as an independent actor, but also its socially legitimated position to take control of situations that call for an agentic actor. By contextualizing actorhood under conditions of heightened paradoxical tensions, we suggest that actorhood is an attributional mechanism by which organizations are seen by public audiences as managing the challenges that confront them.

Third, we take a multimodal approach, examining the interplay between the visual and verbal modes in animating organizations to the public. Such an approach has been called for by previous researchers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2005; Meyer et al., 2013) but has received little empirical attention in the management literature. We propose that the two modalities function in different but complementary ways: the verbal mode highlights and sharpens paradoxical tensions while the visual mode interprets these to show how organizational agency (implied by actorhood) can address the challenge. The holistic nature of the visual, for which we find empirical support, provides opportunities to effectively capture the ambiguity, uncertainty and contradictions of the paradoxical tensions of the times, and especially, the ways in which organizations might act to address them.

**Visualizing organizational actorhood in the context of paradox**
Our theoretical linchpin in relating actorhood and paradox is organizational agency; we propose that organizational agency may be effectively conveyed using the visual mode. We unpack our theoretical argument by first drawing on those theoretical threads in the management literature that explicate organizational actorhood and agency. Basically, we propose that visual images, because of their highly polysemous nature, can effectively denote animation, actorhood, and agency, and thus, will be used more often to depict organizations in periods of heightened environmental paradox.

Organizational actorhood and visual imaging

In several streams of the management literature, including organizational institutionalism (e.g., Scott & Meyer, 1994), organizational identity (e.g., King et al., 2010), and the social construction of the organization (e.g., Drori, Meyer & Hwang, 2009; Meyer & Bromley, 2013), theorists describe the modern world as one in which organizations are increasingly constructed as actors in society.

Organizations make self-claims to actorhood, having “increasingly depicted themselves as entities with values, agency and responsibility on a growing range of social and economic issues, all of which are consistent with modern notions of actorhood” (Bromley & Sharkey, 2017: 1). Organizations claim actorhood in the names they choose for themselves (Glynn & Abzeg, 2002), thereby endowing themselves as entities having identity, purpose, and industry membership, and with the capability for acting in ways that are consistent with these claims (Meyer, 2016). More generally, actorhood connotes a standing of “agentic actors, [that] commonly act on behalf of the great principles that empower their agency” (Meyer, 2010: 15). In essence, organizations are anthropomorphized.
This recent construal of organizations as actors stands in contrast to that of earlier periods, particularly the 1960s. Then, consistent with beliefs prevalent at the emergence of organizational theory (see Davis, 2013 for an overview), organizations were viewed as more fixed, staid closed systems and less dynamic entities, i.e., as material representations (Schein, 1990) or “tools” in the hands of their owners (Bromley & Sharkey, 2017: 1; also see, e.g., Coleman, 1974; King et al., 2010; Meyer, 2010; Pedersen & Dobbin, 1997) rather than as actors in their own right. The contrast between the two theorizations is highlighted by Whetten and Mackey (2002: 397) who state that: “It is widely acknowledged in organizational scholarship that organizations are both authorized social actors and social artifacts.” Although organizations may be authorized as actor or as artifact, the implications of each of these are significant and different.

When an organization is authorized as an artifact, it is symbolized as an object created and used by humans (Garud & Rappa, 1994). Such objectification highlights the material forms an organization can take, notably in its outputs or products. Scholars have argued that there is an inverse relationship between the model of an organization as an actor and the model of an organization as an artifact, with the former on the rise and the latter on the decline:

Earlier firms defined themselves narrowly on the basis of their production activities and financial outcomes, making far fewer assertions that they possessed the abstract humanistic values that appear regularly in reports from later years. (Bromley & Sharkey, 2017: 8).

In contrast, when an organization is authorized as an actor, it is symbolized with personhood, endowed with the capability and agency to act on their own interests. Moreover, because “actor” is a status that must be granted by other actors and not simply claimed by an organization itself, the external attributions that audiences make are essential to authorizing actorhood (King et al., 2010: 292).
In displaying an organization to external audiences, perhaps no medium better conveys actorhood than a portrait, photograph or visual likeness of a human being (Guthey & Jackson, 2005). Organizational members, and particularly the top management team (TMT), can symbolize the organization, functioning as “key carriers of organizational actorhood” (Bromley & Sharkey, 2017: 24), expressing the strategic posture of the firm. As individuals, absent of organizational identifiers, TMTs might represent only themselves, not the organization; however, when embedded in symbols, language or other representations of the organizations they lead, the TMT can serve as proxies for organizational actorhood. This is particularly true for visual images, which are perceived holistically (Meyer et al., 2013), understood in their entirety via top-down perceptual processing that creates a singular interpretation of the organization; by contrast, bottom-up perceptual processing would treat individual visual elements as distinct or separate building blocks which would be aggregated. Langer (1953) explains this as a function of the “presentation symbolization” of visual images which, because of their higher polysemy, are understood only in the context of the image; as a result, interpretations are not built brick by brick through the bottom-up processing of individual elements. Visual images are thus context-dependent and can have entirely different meanings in different contexts; for instance, the significance of the image of a running bull on Wall Street is quite different from that of an image of a running bull in Pamplona, Spain.

To summarize, we propose that the visual mode, with its higher polysemy relative to the verbal mode, is particularly well-suited to depicting and animating an organization as an actor. We expect that, over our study period (1978-2007), we will observe an increase in the visualization of organizations as actors that is commensurate with a number of broad and significant changes that occurred over this time frame. For instance, the period has been
associated with the rise of managerialism, which emphasized the importance of organizational leadership to the firm (e.g., Bromley & Sharkey, 2017; Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007), and thus the construal of actorhood. Also noteworthy was the emergence of new business logics, associated with the internet boom and bust (circa 2000), and the fragmentation of industries, often precipitated by deregulation, as in transportation (circa 1978) and the globalization of the automobile industry (circa 1980). And, with the ascendancy of visualizations of organizational actorhood, we expect a commensurate decline in visualizations of organizations as artifacts in this same period. More formally, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1): Over time (1978-2007), the business media will visually portray organizations increasingly as social actors, endowed with personhood; by comparison, the business media will visually portray organizations decreasingly as social artifacts, or simply material representations of their outputs.*

**Organizational actorhood and the management of paradox**

Actors act. To be an actor is to exert agency so as to manage one’s behavior purposely in order to realize one’s aspirations, ambitions and goals, even under challenging conditions. Agency is particularly critical in managing those situations with heightened uncertainty, contradictions, and paradox. Paradox embeds tensions that are not only contradictory but multi-level, “interwoven at macro-cultural and firm levels” (Johnston & Selsky, 2005: 198), and pivot broadly around dimensions of change and challenge, including oppositional forces such as “clarity and uncertainty” (Vince & Broussine, 1996: 7).

The triggers for paradox are many and include “globalization, innovation, hyper-competition and social demands … plurality, change and scarcity” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 399) as well as “increasing technological change, global competition, and workforce diversity” (Lewis, 2000: 760). In the modern era, “unprecedented complexity, diversity and pace” have forced organizations to grapple with new kinds of tensions (Smith et al., forthcoming: 4). These
conditions set up paradox because they embed forces for both stability and change that pull the organization in opposing directions; for instance, globalization can pit local interests against international ones; diversification can create tensions between ingroups and outgroups defined by gender, race, ethnicity, age or other demographic characteristics; and technology can intensify the contestation between the old and the new.

The organizational management of these contradictory tensions is a critical task that typically falls to leadership (Quinn, 1988), such as senior executives (Denison, Hooijberg & Quinn, 1995; Fiol, 2002; Smith & Lewis, 2012; Smith & Tushman, 2005), middle or front-line managers, or individuals at different levels of the organization (see Schad et al., 2016 for a review). The TMT is typically in the best position to deal with, and manage, such strategic contradictions (Knight & Paroutis, forthcoming). This is because paradox taxes leaders’ cognitive limits and it is the TMT who typically have the mental templates or frames that “recognize and accept the simultaneous existence of contradictory forces” (Smith & Tushman, 2005: 526), and therefore can enact “more fluid, reflexive, and sustainable management strategies” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 395). Thus, organizational members from the upper echelons may be particularly well suited to personify the organization as an actor and to strategize organizational action.

Because visual images of organizational actorhood can connote organizational capabilities for action, we expect that these will increase over the time period of our study, as we hypothesized above (H1). Beyond this general trend, we expect that there will be an association between organizational actorhood and periods of heightened environmental uncertainty and paradox; under these conditions, organizations will be visually depicted more frequently as actors. More formally, we hypothesize:
Hypothesis 2 (H2): Over time (1978-2007), the business media will visually portray organizations as social actors most frequently in periods characterized by heightened paradoxical tensions in the environment.

Research methods

Data sources

Our data consists of all covers of BusinessWeek (BW) magazine published over the 30 years between January 1, 1978 and December 21, 2007 (n=1522). We accessed these data using the BW website (www.businessweek.com/info/backiss.htm) or through our university archives. Founded in 1929 and published weekly since, BW was the most widely read U.S. business magazine (Alliance for Audited Media, 2014) during our study period, with a peak print circulation of 1.2 million worldwide in 2000 (Shepard, 2013: 989). Consistent with other researchers (e.g., Khurana, 2002), we chose BW because, like an annual report, it can “convey status as an actor… [and] reveal the socially legitimate position of a firm in society” (Bromley & Sharkey, 2017: 3).

This dataset was attractive for several reasons. First, the magazine cover is an important cultural object that presents the face of fame (Cerulo, 1984; Khurana, 2002; Guthey & Jackson, 2005), offering concrete visual representations of often abstract ideas (Cerulo, 1984: 566) like actorhood. The design of the cover image is considered the most important editorial and design page in a magazine, with 80% of newsstand sales determined by what is shown on the cover (Johnson & Prijatel, 1999: 240). Second, the magazine cover – because it contains both visual images and text (headlines or captions surrounding the image) – affords a juxtaposition of both the visual and the verbal, enabling a multimodal investigation.

Our study period had several built-in controls: BW’s business model did not change over the period; sales occurred both by subscription and newsstand; the magazine had a consistent
look and format; and there were only three different editors–in-chief. We checked for an “editor effect” but found none; each editor featured organizations on roughly the same percentage of covers (ANOVA \( F(2,27)=0.74, \) p n.s.) consistent with the overall sample (n=530, 35%). Covers not featuring organizations tended to highlight broader, non-organizationally specific macro-economic trends (e.g., “The Outlook for Interest Rates” 9/26/1983), societal issues (e.g., “The Economics of Aging” 9/12/1994), or political issues (e.g., “Does your Vote Matter?” 6/14/2004).

In our sample, 281 different organizations from 20 different industries were depicted on 530 different covers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their prominence in the economy, large, visible, Fortune 500 firms appeared with the most frequency: IBM (n=20), Microsoft (n=17), GM (n=14), Apple (n=13) and GE (n=12). The most frequently appearing industries were: Manufacturing (n=252/530, 48%), Information (n=121/530, 23%), and Finance and Insurance (n=74/530, 14%). We thus had variation in industries as well as organizations that produce tangible goods and intangible assets.

**Coding and analyses of BW covers**

*Visual coding.* We trained three independent coders to use a visual codebook which we developed for the study; each cover was coded by at least two coders. Inter-coder differences were noted, discussed, and resolved to reach 100% agreement.

*Organizational actorhood.* We coded a BW cover as conveying organizational actorhood when it depicted one or more persons associated with the organization; this image of personhood characterized the vast majority of covers featuring organizations (n=432/530, 81.5%). Actorhood was personified primarily through the CEO (n=357/432, 83%), but occasionally through other individuals, e.g., an unnamed man at a desk resting on the back of a bull (“Merrill Lynch’s Big

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1 The Scott’s pi coefficients for the initial coding of visualization of actorhood and visualization as artifact were 0.9 and 0.7, respectively.
Dilemma,” 1/16/84) or an employee, such as GE engineer Anadraj Sengupta, (“The Rise of India,” 12/8/03). There was little gender and racial diversity overall: no more than 10% of the actorhood covers featured women (n=42/432, 10%) or racial minorities (n=27/432, 6%).

Organizational artifacts. Although artifacts can take a variety of forms (Schein, 1990), we focus on organizational products because these are readily visualized as organizational representations (e.g., Navis & Glynn, 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) and material instantiations (Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2002; Cetina, 1997; Latour, 1996; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Ravasi & Stigliani, 2012). We coded a cover image as representing an artifact when it featured the outputs, objects or products of the organization (n=194/530, 37%); examples include a cell phone (Motorola, 3/29/1982), a truck (Toyota, 11/18/2003), and athletic shoes (K-Swiss, 6/7/2004). There was not a one-to-one correspondence between the materiality of an organization’s products and their depiction as an artifact: insurance agencies were sometimes visualized as money, while automotive manufacturers and airlines were sometimes depicted solely as actors.

Verbal coding. To analyze multimodality, we investigated the relationship between the visual images and the verbal captions or text that accompanied them on the BW covers. We used two established software programs, i.e., the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd & Francis, 2015) and the Lasswell Value Dictionary (Namenwirth & Weber, 1987), to code the verbal text reliably, focusing on the headlines of every BW cover (n=1522). We operationalized actorhood using the kinds of words (or verbal text) that actors ordinarily would use, i.e., personal pronouns (e.g., I, them). We operationalized paradoxical tensions using two measures found in the verbal text: one, consisting of suggestive words, and the second, a punctuation mark. Because paradox consists of contradictory demands and tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011), we coded as paradoxical indicators, verbal text that spoke directly to such
tensions, by “denoting feelings of uncertainty, doubt and vagueness” (e.g., ambivalence, instable, quandary) (Namenwirth & Weber, 1987); and, as a supplement, we counted the number of question marks on each cover to assess the uncertainty associated with paradox.

Environmental paradox. We independently operationalized environmental paradox using archival measures, not associated with the BW covers. We used counts of the number of articles, by year, published in the Wall Street Journal (WSJ), that contained keywords associated with three distinct triggers associated with heightened paradox identified in the literature (e.g., Lewis 2000; Smith et al., forthcoming): 1) global competition facing American firms, indicated by the usage of keywords “international,” and “competition,” 2) workforce diversity, with a focus the rise of corporate women, indicated by the usage of keywords “corporate,” “leadership,” and “women;” and 3) technological change, with a focus on the digital economy, indicated by the usage of keywords “digital,” “virtual,” and “internet.”

Year. We included year of BW publication to account for the effects of time.

Analytic approach. To test our two hypotheses, we quantitatively assessed the broad patterns of actorhood and artifacts depicted on BW covers to discern: 1) their frequency by year over time (H1), and 2) their occurrence under conditions of heightened paradoxical tensions (H2). Specifically, we utilized pairwise correlations and mean comparison tests to determine the statistical significance of relationships between visualized actorhood, verbal text, and paradoxical tensions in the business environment. Initially, we present the tests of our hypotheses and follow this with illustrations from IBM, the most frequently depicted organization on BW covers. We illustrate our findings by examining selected covers that depict organizational actorhood in periods of heightened paradox. These illustrations are offered simply to aid the interpretation of our hypotheses tests and statistical findings.
Results

Tables 1 and 2 present the descriptive statistics and pairwise correlations for our variables. To start, we observe that organizations are visualized as both actors and as artifacts on BW covers, but there is a significant, inverse relationship between these two images \((r=-.29, p<.001)\). BW cover images tend to depict organizations either as actors or as artifacts, but generally not as both, on the same cover. We found that the visualization of organizational actorhood was positively and significantly associated with the use of personal pronouns \((r=.19, p<.001)\), while the reverse was true for artifacts \((r=-.11, p<.05)\). More generally, BW covers visualizing actorhood used significantly more personal pronouns than non-actor covers \((t(528)=-4.40, p<.001)\). Thus, the anthropomorphic depiction of the organization as an actor was reinforced in, and complemented by, both visual images and verbal text.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Test of hypothesis 1: The rise of actorhood

Hypothesis 1 (H1), predicting a rise in the visualizations of organizational actorhood and a decline in visualizations of artifacts found convergent support through several analyses. First, we found that images of both actorhood and artifacts were significantly related to year, but in opposite directions that were consistent with H1: for actorhood, we found a positive correlation \((r=.25, p<.001)\), indicating an increase in this visualization over time, but for artifact, we found a negative correlation \((r=-.23, p<.001)\) indicating a decline in this visualization over time.

To examine these trends by year on BW covers, we plotted these two organizational visualizations, i.e., actor and artifact, annually. Figure 1 shows that, from the late 1970s through the early 1980s, organizations were infrequently visualized as actors, appearing on less than 30% of the 1981 covers, for instance. Subsequently, the trend shifted; actorhood exponentially
increased, peaking at 100% in 1988 and remaining high for the remainder of our study period\textsuperscript{2}. An increase in actorhood was also found in the verbal text; there was a significant, positive relationship between the use of personal pronouns on a cover and year of publication ($r=.18$, $p<.001$). Thus, our findings indicate there was an increase in the endowment of organizations with personhood visually, as well as verbally, over our period of study, supporting H1.

We also found a significant decline annually in the visualization of the organization as an artifact (Figure 1), from a high of 81% in 1981, with a generally declining trend over the following decades (less than 50% of covers following 1983), to a low of 14% in 2000, consistent with the correlation results (Table 1), lending further support to H1. Thus, as predicted, we found evidence of an increase in the visualization of organizations as actors, and a concomitant decrease in that of artifacts, from 1978 to 2007\textsuperscript{3}.

To take a closer look at the changes in BW covers shown in Figure 1, we reviewed the 20 covers for the most frequently depicted organization – IBM – which would permit us to take a longitudinal view. Mirroring the trends shown in Figure 1, IBM was visualized initially as an artifact, i.e., a computer (4/28/1980) and a blue dress shirt (6/8/1981); subsequently, as a combination of the company logo and a computer (10/3/1983); and, later (in 15 of the next 17 covers beginning in 1985), as an actor. The first of these actorhood covers (2/18/1985) featured a formal portrait of IBM President and CEO, John Akers, with text listing sales goals and the uncertainty of achieving them, i.e., “It won’t be easy.” The covers through 2005, however, shift

\textsuperscript{2} We also ran logistic regression models investigating visual depictions of organizations while controlling for industry using NAICS codes. The pattern of results was identical to those presented in the paper; visualizations of actorhood increased over time and in comparison, visualizations using artifacts decreased.

\textsuperscript{3} To address the possibility that the depiction of actorhood was unduly influenced by CEO-specific factors such as prestige or celebrity, we also ran analyses excluding covers featuring CEOs and the results were consistent with those presented in the paper; among the limited sample (n=175) we found an increasing display of visualized actorhood ($r=.21$, $p<.01$).
in their portrayal, imbuing IBM with increasing emotion, activity, animation, and agency as an actor. For instance, the cover “How IBM became a growth company again” (12/9/1996) features IBM CEO Lou Gerstner wearing a construction hard hat, connoting an active ‘on-the-ground’ builder, that seems oppositional to the buttoned-up formality of his business suit; the visual is suggestive of IBM’s need to balance from both the top down (using his formal authority as the “boss”) and the bottom up (as a construction worker). Later (12/13/1999, see Figure 2, image A), during the height of the dotcom bubble, the cover titled “IBM The Biggest Dotcom of Them All,” expressed the uncertainties precipitated by the new internet frontier for a traditional corporation like IBM. The cover image featured Gerstner in a dark formal suit (indicative of convention) but with his left hand held out under a glowing letter “e.” Gerstner’s actions seemingly extend beyond the realities of the physical world, and into the realm of the magical, signaling IBM’s capability to innovatively strategize in the new digital landscape. Thus, the case of IBM illustrates the general trends observed (Figure 1): media construals of individual organizations tend to shift from artifacts to actors, and with this, the more animated expressions of agency associated with actorhood.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Test of hypothesis 2: Actorhood and heightened paradoxical tensions

To test H2, predicting that the visual portrayal of organizations as social actors will occur most frequently in periods characterized by heightened paradoxical tensions in the environment, we began by examining all BW covers (n=1522) to see if the verbal expression of paradox changed over time. We found a significant, positive correlation between verbal indicators of paradox and year of BW publication (r=.05, p<.05), a finding that is consistent with literature indicating a rise in paradoxical tensions facing organizations in the late 20th and early 21st
century (Lewis, 2000; Smith et al., forthcoming). Next, analyzing the BW organizational covers (n=530), we found that visual depictions of actorhood were related to verbal indicators of paradox on the same cover, i.e., significantly correlated with the use of question marks (r=.12, p<.01) and marginally to words in the Lasswell Value Dictionary suggestive of tension (r=.08, p<.10). In addition, covers with visualizations of actorhood had significantly more words denoting tension (t(528)=-1.83, p<.05) and question marks (t(528)=-2.72 p<.01) than non-actor covers. Although, not independent measures of environmental paradox, this pattern of findings suggests that visual depictions of actorhood often appeared with verbal text addressing paradoxical tensions.

In our analysis using data from the WSJ, an independent operationalization of environmental paradox, we found that visual depictions of actorhood were significantly related to heightened paradoxical tensions, providing support for H2. As presented in Table 2, the annual percentage of BW covers visualizing actorhood was positively correlated with annual counts of WSJ articles addressing global competition, workplace diversity, and technological change (r=.43, p<.05; r=.64, p<.001; r=.32, p<.10, respectively). In comparison, the annual percentage of BW covers visualizing artifacts was negatively correlated to the same WSJ articles (r=-.44, p<.05; r=-.59, p<.001; r=-.53, p<.05, respectively). Moreover, we found this pattern of results consistent with peaks and valleys in the trend lines shown in Figure 1. Peaks in actorhood coincided with heightened tensions associated with global competition, workforce diversity and technological change, consistent with the kinds of paradoxical tensions previously observed (Lewis, 2000: 760; Smith et al., forthcoming). To further illustrate this relationship, we offer descriptions of selected BW covers for each of the key triggers associated with paradox.
Increasing global competition: The paradox of nationalism vs. internationalism. In the late 1980s through the early 1990s, the automotive industry in the U.S. was adversely impacted by the recession and soaring gasoline prices; the effect was to increase the appeal of fuel-efficient Japanese cars (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Brooks & Mulloy, 2015). The influx of Japanese competitors in the American market increased competitive tensions in the industry. One source of uncertainty, expressed visually and verbally on the BW covers, was whether (or not) to collaborate with, or learn from, Japanese competitors. This tension emerged as American firms adopted Japanese management styles, Japanese firms opened production plants within the United States, and auto-manufacturers used globally-sourced parts.

A 1988 BW cover, “The Americanization of Honda” (4/25/1988), clearly depicts the tension. Visual images show a Japanese couple dressed in traditional kimonos and an American couple dressed in stereotypical suburban attire; the two couples are connected through a car but are facing in opposite directions, connoting paradox. Although the visual includes an artifact, a car, the holistic message emphasizes the Janus-like two-headed positioning of the couples in opposing directions. The visual further suggests a possible resolution: Honda, as a hybridization of Eastern and Western cultures, might achieve balance by retaining its Japanese identity while incorporating American values.

Similarly, a 1990 cover addresses these tensions with different images (9/24/1990): “Mighty Mitsubishi. Japan’s largest industrial group is on the move around the world…And it’s bringing the unique keiretsu system to America.” The visual presented in Figure 2 image B, displays a faceless Japanese figure wearing a kimono with the imagery of modern global technology intertwined into the fabric. The central figure highlights the tensions voiced in the text: American organizations will be subsumed under the cloak of traditional Japan. The visual
connotes that organizations may need to blend into the Japanese “fabric” with the changes underway in the global automotive industry. The assumed agency of both Japanese and American organizations is brought to face the changing landscape. Contrary to the Honda cover, this image suggests a relationship that may never be balanced: Japanese competitors (i.e., American firms) will need to be deferential. The visually connoted management strategy for Mitsubishi to deal with the contrasting cultures is one of integration, or perhaps even domination.

Verbal texts on covers addressing globalization, tended to imply threat and tension (e.g., “Mighty Mitsubishi” 9/24/1990; “Toyota’s Crusade” 4/7/1997 “Honda, is it an American Car?” 11/18/1991), particular in their headlines. The visualizations of organizations in this period stand in stark contrast to the BW covers of automotive organizations in the pre-globalization era; then, tensions seemed less pressing, as evident in the 1979 cover titled “GM’s Juggernaut” (3/26/1979) that focuses on a car dashboard representing market share. Generally speaking, the organizational covers published under conditions of paradox, such as those of Honda and Mitsubishi, offer both expressions of the paradox (nationalism vs. internationalism) as well as some guidance on its management (i.e., balancing or integrating the competing cultures).

*Increasing workforce diversity: The paradox of masculinity vs. femininity.* The late 1980s saw an increase in the numbers of professional women in corporate America, particularly in the upper echelons, and with this, paradoxical tensions emerged that were associated with greater workforce diversity (Lewis, 2000). Some covers verbalized the tension itself, questioning its uncertain impact, e.g., “Women at work: How they are reshaping the economy” (1/28/1985). Other covers suggested a possible solution, particularly in terms of balancing or synthesizing these tensions. For instance, a 1998 cover featuring Mattel CEO Jill Barad (5/2/1998) shows her posed and aggressively staring at the camera, in a power suit, much like a traditional CEO (not
unlike those on IBM covers described earlier); however, her suit is colored pink. Barad’s posture and clothing are male, but the color is decidedly female.

A different cover personifies CEO Martha Stewart as her firm, “Martha INC” (1/17/2000), presented in Figure 2, image C. The image connotes paradoxical tensions, presenting Stewart as a gardener, in a casual, purple sweater holding a farmer’s rake, but standing in front of the organization’s financial images; the overall effect is to counter-pose the corporate against the homemaker. The imagery is one of a queen ruling her empire with her scepter-rake but also accountable to the economics of the empire. The visual suggests that the organization might balance the opposing forces to become competitively distinct (CEO with a rake), but still a legitimate fit within the economic environment (attending to finances). Again, the visualization of the organization offers both an expression of the paradox of diversity (masculinity vs. femininity or being female in a predominantly male corporate world) as well as some guidance on its management and, especially, the need to balance or integrate the contradictory tensions.

Increasing technological change: The paradox of reality vs. virtuality. The seeming contradictions between the business models of “bricks and mortar” and “bricks and clicks” emerged during the dotcom era and were depicted on several covers. The 1999 IBM cover described earlier, (see Figure 2, image A) conjures up IBM as a magical act, able to dispel the threat of a new high-tech environment with CEO wizardry. Believing in transformative magic – and its associated mystical powers (however irrational it may be) – thwarts the threat of the future; the organization is depicted as being in control, able to synthesize the past (represented by the traditional, buttoned-up business suit) and the impending future (the frontier of the digital landscape) to reveal a new IBM for a new era.
Similarly, Microsoft on a 1999 cover (1/19/1999) is depicted as thousands of tiny images of CEO Bill Gates that cohere to form a larger portrait with the query, “Microsoft: How dominant will it be?” Through the visual, the organization is depicted holistically, as an aggregation of its many parts (all embodied by Gates). It is an image that “consists of a set of individual pictorial elements, each of which can convey an individual meaning or idea, but, importantly, are spatially arranged into a totality of meaningful parts” (Meyer et al., 2013: 494). The implication is that Microsoft can strategize to manage the paradoxical tensions of innovation accentuated in the verbal text (with its question about an uncertain future) to become omnipresent yet true to their original form and founder, Gates.

Together, these covers illustrate the dynamics of visualization under “peak” conditions of heightened paradox as well as a synchronicity between the verbal and visual modes. More specifically, we noted that the verbal texts were used most often to articulate the particular paradox confronting the organization, i.e., globalism, diversity, and technology, with their evocative words and questions. Perhaps because of their lower polysemy, verbal texts can spell out the environmental challenges more clearly and explicitly than the visual. Consistent with results from our statistical analysis, we noted that verbal texts tended to be used more often than visualization to convey tensions, employing vocabularies of threat, uncertainty, contestation, and contradiction. The visual, however, interpreted these tensions holistically to suggest potential strategies of action that the organization, as an actor, may take to resolve the paradox. For instance, we found that organizational actorhood was depicted as balancing paradoxical tensions (e.g., Stewart balancing feminine and masculine imagery) or integrating these tensions (e.g., Barad wearing a pink suit; Gerstner revealing a digital symbol; Mitsubishi weaving the competition into their fabric). The interpretive nature of each image is suggestive, leaving it to
the audience to discern whether the management strategy proposed in the visual, made possible through actorhood, will be effective in countering the opposing forces denoted in the verbal mode.

In summary, the complementarity between the verbal and visual, appears to be a communication mechanism conducive to expressing and resolving the complexities, contradictions, and management of, paradox; here, the visual, with its higher polysemy and holistic signification (Meyer et al., forthcoming), complements the verbal. Consistent with previous research, we revealed how this communication included: 1) articulating the paradoxical frame, 2) differentiating between opposing tensions and the contrasting strategies they implied, and 3) integrating (or balancing) across those strategies (Smith & Tushman, 2005: 522). Given the greater precision capable with verbal text, with its lower polysemy relative to the visual mode, it appears that the verbal mode was more often used for framing and differentiation (#1 and #2, above), while the visual, with its higher polysemy, showed possible ways, implied by actorhood, of integrating strategic contradictions in order to manage them (#3, above).

Discussion

Our study addressed two research questions: 1) How does the business media visualize organizational actorhood, and how might this change over time? And, 2) How do visual images of organizational actorhood change in the context of heightened environmental challenges? We formalized these questions in two hypotheses which we tested empirically, using the visual images on the covers of BusinessWeek (BW) magazine, published from 1978 to 2007, supplemented by an analysis of the verbal text that embedded them, in order to employ a multimodal approach.
Our fist hypothesis (H1), predicting an increase in the visualization of organizations as actors over time, was supported, for the three decades we studied. We found that the visualization was complemented by the accompanying verbal text. Moreover, we found that the visualization of organizational actorhood contrasted sharply with the visualization of the organization as an artifact; the BW magazine covers tended to use one depiction or the other, but not both together. Additionally, we noted that as the visualization of actorhood increased over time, while that of artifact declined.

Our second hypothesis (H2), predicting that the visualization of organizational actorhood would occur more frequently under environmental conditions of heightened paradox, was supported. We characterized heightened paradox as the increased presence of competing and contradictory tensions in the environment, pulling the organization in opposing directions. Associated with such contradictions was the visualization of organizations as actors, implying the capability of organizations to act on these environmental, paradoxical demands. Our findings revealed how visual images offered a set of rich meanings and more diverse touchstones for generating interpretations about how the organization might effectively manage paradox. We found that such visualization was complemented by verbal text that, literally, spelt out the competing tensions. Thus, it seemed that language, with its lower polysemy and more fixed or rigid meanings, clarified the nature of the contradictions while the visual, higher in polysemy, interpreted ways for organizations to act on them. In the visual images we studied, resolution was expressed by depicting an organization as an actor imbued with agency to integrate, balance or simply act on these tensions.

Our work makes several contributions to the management literature. First, we complement current research to show that it is not only organizations that construe themselves as
actors, but also their external constituents, including the business media and their audiences. We found that the business media, over time, increasingly visualized the organization in terms of personhood, often using its executives as proxies; the effect of this was to seemingly position the organization as capable to act agentically in situations calling for agency. Our analyses of BW covers indicated that actorhood is an attributional mechanism by which organizations can be presented as potent agents, able to manage the paradoxical tensions that confront them. Whereas organizations’ self-claims to actorhood (such as those made in annual reports) might be biased attempts to project a positive or efficacious organizational image, external construals, particularly by the media, may provide a more considered perspective regarding the organization’s ability to navigate challenges. This visualization of organizations as actors imbued with agency, confronting paradoxical tensions, extends previous research (especially that of Smith and Tushman, 2005), and, theoretically, points to the potential of the visual mode in conveying both the problems and solutions organizations confront under environmental challenges. More generally, our results suggest that such depictions of organizational actorhood may be extensions of the media’s role in sensemaking (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Second, we show that visual images, perhaps because they are not bound to the comparatively strict rules and conventions governing language (e.g., Meyer et al., 2013), can usefully expand our understanding of how organizations navigate challenging times. Our research connects to that by Höllerer et al. (2013: 142) who theorized that visual images, because of “their multivocal and plastic nature allows for the simultaneous communication of potentially antagonistic ideas, thereby mediating as well as balancing divergent ideational systems.” Our findings support their contention and extend it to show how the media seeks to construe organizations as accomplishing this, and doing so specifically in contexts of heightened
“antagonistic” or paradoxical contexts. And it is in these periods we find the media most frequently visualized organizations as actors, i.e., animated agents empowered to address these tensions. Thus, visual images not only contain multiple – or even paradoxical – meanings but also project them on to those situations where they might be most salient and beneficially help actors and their audiences understand how to manage such challenges.

Third, because our approach is multimodal, our work makes a contribution by revealing the important interplay between the visual and verbal modes in depicting organizations; however, we add nuance to this relationship by revealing the interplay between them. Generally speaking, our results are consistent with existing work showing how the visual mode enriches the verbal, by conveying more complex and expressive meanings because of its higher polysemy (Giorgi & Glynn, 2015). We extend this line of research, however, by showing how multimodality, and especially the complementarity between the visual and the verbal, is heightened in contexts that are paradoxical.

And yet, our findings imply a more fine-grained understanding of multimodality: the verbal seems to function to highlight and sharpen paradoxical tensions, while the visual suggests ways of interpreting these so as to enable organizational action. Thus, while they can be complementary, the visual and verbal need not be comparable functionally; rather, our findings suggest a likely synchronicity such that each amplifies and extends the other.

As well, our inquiry into these dual modes of expression contributes to the literature on the management of paradox. In studying paradox, researchers have tended to focus on its expression in language and the manifestation of competing tensions in verbal text (O’Connor 1995; Vlaar, Van den Bosch & Volberda, 2007, for exceptions, see Guthey & Jackson, 2005); and our findings are consistent with this. However, we show how the visual, when paired with
the verbal, can extend the text so as to incorporate the “aesthetic and affective dimension into communication” (Meyer et al., 2013: 496-497). The result of this pairing can be particularly potent as “both constitute complex systems of symbolic signs and are able to build up and organize zones of meaning” (Meyer et al., 2013: 494). Thus, our work speaks to not only the oppositional forces that embed paradox, but also to their management via visual and verbal modes. Moreover, the longitudinal nature of our study shows how the visual display of actorhood can be adapted to waves of newly emerging paradoxical tensions over time. As such, our study offers a useful extension to research that examines paradox only in a limited period of time; we show how paradoxical tensions can wax and wane in intensity, and type, and thus elicit visual representations that facilitate understanding and management.

Limitations and directions for future research

Empirically, our data was limited to one type of visualization (magazine covers) and one data source (BW magazines), which are shaped by a variety of cultural intermediaries – photographers, public relations staff, photo editors, graphic designers, and journalists – all of whom pursue overlapping and sometimes conflicting agendas and interests (Davison, 2010; Guthey, Clark & Jackson, 2009). Thus, although the visual might be a composite reflecting all these interests, it might also be a negotiated outcome, not reflecting any one of these interests. Future researchers might unpack the influences of different constituencies on media visualizations of organizations. We speculate that those stakeholders with expertise in the visual mode might be more influential in capturing and presenting organizational images while writers might do so in the verbal realm. Understanding the kinds of external actors who contribute to, and authorize, depictions of organizational actorhood would be an interesting pursuit for future researchers.
Our research focused on a single media representation – magazine covers – and we suggest that future scholars might consider interdisciplinary work with communications and media studies to investigate other kinds of visual portrayals (e.g., other periodical or popular press publications, such as newspapers, television or social media) as well as the interplay of media-created versus organizationally-created visuals, as presented in annual reports (e.g., Bromley & Sharkey, 2017) or CSR reports (e.g., Höllerer et al., 2013). Moreover, we would be remiss not to acknowledge that media images might be less about veridical representations of organizations and, instead, be attempts to spur subscribership with enticing magazine covers to boost sales (Johnson & Prijatel, 1999). Future researchers might extend our work by looking at consumer reactions to cover images, perhaps through sales figures or surveys.

In addition, future researchers might take up where we left off, by exploring the effects of the visualized strategies of action depicted for organizations challenged by paradoxical tensions. If visualized actorhood is an important signal of an organization’s ability to address paradox, we might expect that personified organizations will perform better both economically and reputationally. We might speculate that external stakeholders or potential investors are more confident in the actions taken by organizations depicted visually as actors because they can literally “see” how they might effectively address tensions. For instance, among automakers in our sample, Honda, frequently depicted as a social actor, arguably experienced better financial performance than competitors who were more frequently depicted solely as artifacts (e.g., GM, Ford, Chrysler). While our study is not equipped to investigate causality or account for many unexamined variables that may confound this observation, we see opportunities to further explore performance implications or other organizational outcomes.
Our results revealed how the construal of organizational actorhood extends beyond the boundaries of the organization to images in the media. Scholars might investigate the consistencies (or inconsistencies) between public construals aimed at external audiences and self-construals by the organization itself. For instance, it would be interesting to examine the alignment (or misalignment) – in content, temporality or causality – between visualizations of organizational actorhood by the organization in its own publications and those external to it. Research questions worthy of investigation include: Does the organization initially claim actorhood which is later mirrored by the press? Or, is the reverse true, i.e. that actorhood is conferred externally and then adopted internally by organizations? More broadly, what is the degree of alignment between organizational images and those of external audiences?

Theoretically, we focused on the interplay between actorhood and paradox. Clearly, the visual offers rich opportunities for using other theoretical lenses, such as the expression of emotions, perhaps even through color (e.g., Beyes, 2016) or graphics, as well as further elaboration on the inter-relatedness of the visual and the verbal (e.g., Meyer et al., 2013). For instance, scholars might investigate the interplay between the visual images presented on the cover (or elsewhere in the magazine) and the verbal mode conveyed inside the pages of the magazine.

And yet, in spite of its limitations, our study is poised to advance inquiry into theories of organizational actorhood and the management of paradox, as well as into the use of visual and verbal modes. Our principal goal was to present an empirical examination using a longitudinal, historical perspective to examine the visual portrayal of the organization as an actor and its counter-point, as an artifact. We demonstrated that investigating how the organization has been visualized in public media images is an approach particularly well suited to conceptualizing the
organization in this role and revealed the prominence of visualizing actorhood in the context of paradox. More generally, we hope that our investigation of the visual mode of organizational actorhood under paradox will help to clarify existing theory as well as spur needed empirical work in this area.
References


305.


Table 1. Descriptive statistics and pairwise correlations (n=530 organizational covers)

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<td>2</td>
<td>Visualization as artifact</td>
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<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.29***</td>
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<td>Verbal paradox: question marks</td>
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† p<=.10, * p<=.05, ** p<=.01, *** p<=.001
Table 2. Descriptive statistics and pairwise correlations of the counts of the number of articles, by year, published in the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) using relevant keywords to capture heightened paradoxical tensions and visualizations, by year, of organizations featured on BusinessWeek magazine covers (n=30 years).

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<td>2</td>
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<td>WSJ: Workforce diversity</td>
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<td>410.18</td>
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†p<=.10,  *p<=.05,  **p<=.01,  ***p<=.001
Figure 1. Percentages of organizational covers visually depicting the organization as a social actor and as an artifact (1978 - 2007), with logarithmic trend lines.
Figure 2. Selected BW cover images.