**Looking back: Ten years of visual qualitative research**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the development of visual qualitative research in organizations and management over the past ten years, the experience of editing a special issue of *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* entitled ‘Exploring the Visual in Organizations and Management’, and the potential contributions this journal could make to the advancement of this significant area of research.

**Design/methodology/approach**

This paper provides an overview and critical reflections on visual qualitative research in the study of organizations and management.

**Findings**

We note that organization studies have been slow to develop visual research compared to other disciplines, especially the humanities and branches of the social sciences. However, development has been rapid over the past decade, and we comment on the diverse visual empirical material and the range of conceptual approaches.

**Research limitations and implications**

The paper is a condensed reflection. It predicts a ‘mainstreaming’ of visual research in future years and an increased integration of the visual into the study of management processes and organizations.

**Practical implications**

This piece provides useful directions and references for researchers new to the field and different ways of thinking the visual and visual methodologies.

**Originality/value**

The paper provides a rapid overview of the state of visual research in organizations and management studies.

Visual research in organization and management has taken many forms with a growing interest in this area of enquiry over the past decade. We have seen the development of alternative approaches to collecting and analysing data through visual methodologies, different perspectives relating to the study of the ‘visual’ in organizations and diverse set of thinking concerning the different visual metaphors and conceptual reflections with regard to images and practices of imagining. The links with qualitative research are particularly interesting given that perhaps more than any other, visual research is particularly resistant to the quantification that has been dominant in much organization and management research. Images are also especially evocative of emotional and aesthetic intangibles in organizational life, ideally suited for qualitative investigation and of growing importance as firms increasingly compete on the basis of corporate culture, brand, relationships and other immaterial factors. Within this piece we seek to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the *Journal of* *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* by reflecting on the developments within qualitative visual research over the past ten years. This includes the publication of a special issue focusing on ‘Exploring the Visual in Organizations and Management’ (Davison, McLean and Warren, 2012). and the potential contributions this journal could make to this area of research.

Even a cursory look around organizations and the practices of management reveals the extent and diversity of the material to which visual research can be directed (pictures, photographs, videos, graphs, plans, architectural prints and models, fonts, diagrams, advertisements and web pages, to name but a few) and the abundant potential for research in this area. In the past ten years, these possibilities have dramatically increased with developments in internet technologies; for example, the mainstream take-up of broadband internet among UK and US households in the mid-late 2000s (Youde, 2010) allowed richer, more complex visual and multi-media web content to be streamed directly to consumers’ homes. Thus organizational communication with and between stakeholders has become far more sophisticated and is ripe for qualitative investigation (Bell and McArthur, 2014, Elliot and Robinson, 2014). At about the same time, advances in digital photography made personal digital cameras affordable and along with the inception of the camera-phone, these technologies have made the visual ubiquitous. This new, instantaneous and malleable digital image form has changed our relationship with ‘snapshots’ from media that memorialise social and organizational life, to vehicles for communication, identity and community-building. The rise of the ‘selfie’ and mobile digital culture more generally is changing traditional models of communication both within and outside the organization – for example, the recent call for papers of the *European Journal of Marketing* on ‘Selfies’ (Kedzior *et al*., 2015). Thus, the last ten years have seen the context for visual research change dramatically – visual research is no longer just a tool to study organizational processes, or the study of ancillary elements of management, but an investigation of contemporary organisation as it is visually grounded and infused.

Further to the extensive empirical material which provides a rich field of study for the researcher – and indeed in response to its proliferation – the visual has also prompted many fruitful areas of enquiry and debate with regard to more conceptual and theoretical matters (such as the complex intersection of the objective and the subjective and links to ideas of semiotics and materiality). For instance, Gombrich (2002) has sought to explore the intersection between objective representation and subjective construction on the parts of both the creator(s) and the receiver(s) of messages, while others have developed approaches which seek to rethink this subjective/objective divide and how this links to our conceptualisations of the material with respect to the study of visuals. This includes studies based on approaches associated with Deleuzian thinking, actor network approaches (Puyou *et al*., 2011) and institutional theory (Boxenbaum et al. 2014) which link together discussions concerning the visual, material semiotics and organizing. There is also much work on the ‘power’ of the visual in relation to cognition, memory (Carruthers, 1990; Tversky, 1974) and in its emotional and affective power (Albert *et al*., 2000). Of course, this is why images and visual processes are of particular interest to the qualitative visual researcher and a plethora of methods are emerging as ways to tap into these more aesthetic forms of knowledge. Images are used as elicitation tools to facilitate reflection on organizational issues – recent examples include Shortt and Warren’s (2012) use of participant-led visual narrative to research hairdressers’ identity, Alcadipani and Tonelli’s (2014) study of participant made drawings to explore ‘shop-floor’ masculinity, Slutskaya *et al.*’s (2012), photographic study of working life among butchers, and Page and Gaggiotti’s (2012) use of art appreciation and critique as a route into students’ learning about business ethics. And as we also allude to above, organizational images – such as advertisements (Schroeder, 2013), logos (Phillips and Rippin, 2010), annual reports (Davison, 2014), viral videos (Bell and McArthur, 2014) and websites (Elliot and Robertson, 2014) are themselves the focus of study by qualitative researchers using a range of methods developed originally in media, communication, and other arts-based studies. Semiotics, social semiotics, qualitative content analysis, and critical visual analysis are all fruitfully employed to peel back the layers of strategic organizational images and reveal their less obvious associations, power and political effects.

Reflecting this increasingly visual society (Baudrillard, 1982; Bauman, 2000; Debord, 1967), work on the visual has also pervaded critical thinking across the arts (for example, Barthes, 1982a; 1982b; Berger, 1972; Mitchell, 1994; Sontag, 1971) and academic arts disciplines for several decades, and there is longstanding interest in social anthropology in the visual (for example, Pink *et al*., 2004). This has resulted in the establishment of journals such as *Visual Communication, Visual Studies and Visual Culture*, and an increasing number of visual-focused books (for example, Margolis and Pauwels, 2011, Olson *et al*., 2008, Pink, 2014, Rose, 2012). While visual management studies may have been slower to follow this trend, the level of interest is growing at an increasing rate. In 1996, only three papers featured in a seminal special issue of *Accounting, Organizations and Society* (Hopwood, 1996). This doubled to six papers in 2009, as part of a special issue of *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* (Davison and Warren, 2009) and over the past decade there has been increasing interest in this field of study with various workshops, conferences and events. For instance, interest has further been stimulated by initiatives of the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management, such as workshops on aesthetics, architecture, visual images and fashion. The Economic and Social Research Council in the UK has also encouraged work in the area through the *Building Capacity in Visual Methods* programme and in sponsoring the work of the *in*Visio research network (International Network for Visual Studies in Organisations, [www.in-visio.org](http://www.in-visio.org)). There have also been an increasing number of books commissioned in this area (for example, Styhre, 2010; Puyou *et al*., 2011; Bell *et al.* 2014) and papers which track the accelerating growth in visual accounting research (Davison (2015), and more generally in management and organization studies (Bell and Davison, 2013 and Meyer *et al.*, 2013). The forthcoming edition of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (in revision at the time of writing) includes no less than eight chapters on visual methods ranging from observation, to analysing web images to ethnographic video and collage methods, further underscoring the growth and diversification of visual concerns in the qualitative research tradition.

In light of the new and innovative research being conducted in visual studies in organization and management, we were pleased to be invited to contribute further to this fast-moving area of study. This resulted in our editing the special issue of *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* entitled ‘Exploring the visual in Organizations and Management’ (Davison, McLean and Warren, 2012). Not only was this the first dedicated journal issue in the organization and management research literature entirely focused upon visual research and its methodologies, but the timing was ideal given the wealth of excellent papers we received in order to assemble this collection. Furthermore it both raised awareness of the potential of the field and provided fascinating examples of innovative research and practice. This included highly original and creative pieces that showed good critical engagement with the topic and contributed to qualitative research in the organization and management field. The set of six papers that were finally published as a special issue addressed a range of innovative approaches within the field – from photo-elicitation and ‘snaplogs’, to performativity, psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction – and we were delighted that the issue was subsequently awarded the 2012 Emerald Special Issue of the Year award in recognition of its contribution not only to qualitative research, but across the whole business, management and organization studies field.

With technology continuing to change our relationship to organizational life through visual means, we anticipate visual research will undergo a ‘mainstreaming’ over the next ten years, somewhat akin to the process by which qualitative research itself has become an established canon. It will be fascinating to assess how far that vision has been realised in order to keep pace with changing organizational and management worlds and we look forward to reading more fascinating empirical studies and conceptually engaging accounts within this journal. It will be particularly interesting to review this situation in another ten years to see how things have move forward in the study of the visual and the use of visual methodologies within the field of management and organizational studies.

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