


Let's Perform and Paint! The Role of Creative Mediums in Enhancing Management Research Representation

Journal of Management Inquiry
2018, Vol. 27(3) 301–308
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DOI: 10.1177/1056492618760723
journals.sagepub.com/home/jmi


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Abstract

The limited reach of management research results in missed opportunities to support the decision-making processes of business professionals and policy makers. To strengthen the impact of management research and overcome barriers posed by text-heavy representation, we advocate for the use of creative mediums (e.g., collage, film, poetry) to showcase the product of an inquiry, either alone or as a supplement to traditional reporting. We provide a rationale for how these mediums trigger interest, foster a multisensory experience, convey complex meaning, and spark contemporary, inclusive dialogues. Each of the four rationales is discussed by showing an example of previous use, and explaining how the respective barrier to research representation is overcome. We finally offer recommendations for how management researchers can employ creative mediums to enhance the fertility of their work.

Keywords

creativity, innovation, communication

Research Raison d'Être¹

Nothing can make society interested in academic research
And you cannot tell me that
It is possible to bridge this academic-practitioner divide
Because, when we academics get into research mode,
Can our aim be building rapport with the audience too?
A theory might spark contemporary societal interest
But
Building inclusive dialogue is something we don't prioritize.
And some might say that
The problem is how we communicate it
Because
Science can be more interesting to society
Only if research is presented in a more personal and relatable way
That just won't work!
It is unimaginable that
A picture or a play
A dance or a sculpture
Would make bystanders co-creators

Simplification for broadening the audience,
Engagement through participation
All of that is beyond fathom
And you can never change my mind and make me agree that
Interactions are the key to contemporary knowledge exchange.

Introduction

As management scholars, our research lacks an obvious, unanimous, or concise *raison d'être* (Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O'Regan, & Wornham, 2011); we are not bound by an equivalent of the "Hippocratic oath" (Hughes et al., 2011; Romme et al., 2015) that would outline a clear purpose and determine our obligations toward society. Consequently, our research is often only circulated inside our own academic community with

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Figure 1.

limited concerns about its visibility and impact on external audiences (Aguinis et al., 2010). This confinement results in missed opportunities to support the decision-making processes of business professionals and policy makers (Rousseau, 2006).

One key manner in which we can increase the impact of our work (Aguinis et al., 2010; Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006) is to overcome barriers posed by traditional forms of research representations (i.e., mostly texts in a prescribed format). Figure 1 illustrates some of these barriers in reaching practitioners. While these institutionalized formats provide a secure framework for management researchers, they often pose a constraint in bridging the academic-practitioner divide (Parker, 2004). This is where a more “customer-centric” approach (Aguinis et al., 2010, p. 517) friendly to more audiences can play a part (Baron & Eisner, 2012; Knowles & Cole, 2008). For this purpose, we suggest employing creative mediums. For example, we encourage reading “The *Raison d’Etre* of Research” poem that opens this article backward starting with the last line.

Creative mediums build on the expressive qualities of form to convey meaning (Eaves, 2014) by displaying information in an evocative, yet informative way (Chenail, 2008). Ranging from visual (e.g., collage, painting) to performing (e.g., film, music) and literary arts (e.g., poetry, narrative), these mediums are increasingly used in social science research (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Rolling, 2010) to deliver messages in ways that promote deeper understanding (Caulley, 2008; Chenail, 2008; Eaves, 2014), facilitate credible inference, and enable empathetic participation from the audience (Leavy, 2015; Morrison, 2014).

Although as management researchers, we are familiar with employing creative mediums to facilitate the process of inquiry and illustrate intricate and dynamic organizational phenomena (Eaves, 2014; Meisiek, Irgens, & Barry, 2008), we could also use them, either alone or as a supplement, to showcase the product of inquiry. In this article, we advocate for the use of creative mediums in research representation and provide a rationale for how these mediums (a) trigger interest, (b) foster a multisensory experience, (c) convey complex meaning, and (d) spark contemporary, inclusive dialogues. Below, we discuss each rationale by showing an example of previous use, and then explain how the respective barrier to research representation is overcome. These examples, along with others, all from different disciplines, are portrayed in the collage in Figure 1. Finally, we offer recommendations for how management researchers can employ creative mediums in representing their research.

The Story of the Kayapos and a Camera: Creative Mediums Trigger Interest

Imagine looking at a photo or video of an indigenous tribe member with colorful body paint and a heavy beaded necklace filming his peers with a camera in the middle of the Amazon

rainforest (see Image 9 in Figure 1). With the support of such artistic visual media, similar to the one in the collage, illustrating the sharp contrast between a modern device and the tribal environment where it was used, anthropologist Terence Turner (Shepard, 2012) created an association between the seemingly mundane modern features of a camera and the natural environment of the Kayapo tribe. This creative medium thereby triggered interest in the audience and renewed their perspectives on what is taken for granted or has been forgotten about during modern social evolution.

The use of this creative medium affected the external audience in a way that traditional reports often cannot (Spencer, 2001). More often than not, academic texts, which rely on arcane language, content, and style (Hughes et al., 2011), make the subject matter inscrutable and may alienate the audience. In contrast, the implementation of creative mediums demonstrates the “mundane in the remarkable” and “the remarkable in the mundane” (Silverman, 2013, p. 9). This facilitates deeper engagement from nonacademic audiences (Brearley, 2004) by sparking reflection and new perspectives.

“Those Are My Words, That’s Me!” Creative Mediums Foster a Multisensory Experience

“Those are my words, that’s me!” This was the expressive reaction that social work scholar Paula Gerstenblatt (2013, p. 304) evoked in her research contributors when she presented her results in a colorful picture collage (see Image 1 in Figure 1). This collage portrait initiated a multisensory expression of interest, which inherently entails an emotional reaction (Bartunek et al., 2006). Here, we see how creative medium helps address the second barrier to research representation: the inability of traditional mediums to go beyond cognitive ability and bring in emotions and feelings.

Creative mediums act as visual, aural, kinesthetic, and tactile aids that help audiences in perceiving, conceptualizing, and personally relating to the research (Bresler, 2009). Weaving together words and images opens a new world of meaning to the audience by integrating intellectual thoughts with emotional reactions (Adler & Delbecq, 2018), creating a sum which is greater than each component (Gerstenblatt, 2013). This allows people to connect on different levels, beyond the intellectual (Hatch, 2017), for increased empathy between practitioners and academic researchers, which in turn facilitates dissemination and understanding (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Rynes, Bartunek, & Draft, 2001).

It All Started With a Cocktail Analogy: Creative Mediums Convey Complex Meaning

Compare a particle’s navigation in the Higgs field to how a celebrity might move around at a cocktail party. Through this

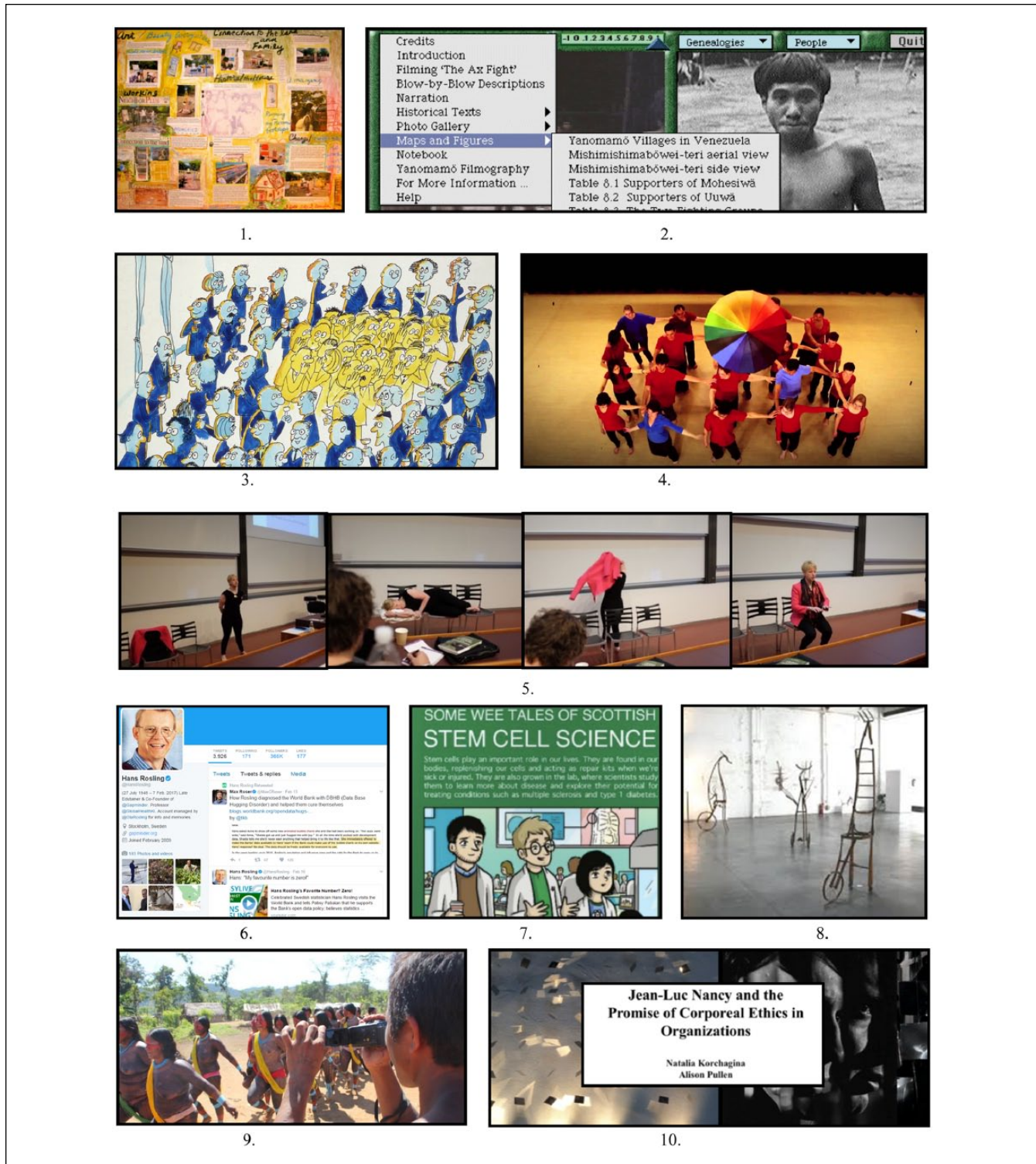


Figure 2. Examples of creative mediums in social science.

(1) Autoethnography collage by Paula Gerstenblatt (Gerstenblatt, 2010). (2) Yanomamö Interactive by Peter Biella, Napoleon A. Chagnon, Gary Seaman (Banks, 2000). (3) The cocktail party analogy on Higgs boson, David Miller (Jepsen, 2013). (4) “A super alloy is born” by Peter Liddicoat, Dance your PhD winner of 2012 (Liddicoat, 2012). (5) EGOS 2017 Conference Presentation “Sleepless and inchoate in Boston: A performative auto/ethnography” (Beavan, 2017). Sub-theme coordinated by Carl Rhodles, Alison Pullen and Torkild Thanem. (6) Twitter feed of Hans Rosling (Rosling, 2017). (7) Hope beyond hope. Scottish stem cell stories (Hall, Melville, Ross, and Southworth, 2003). (8) Bricolage sculpture by Marc Sparfel (Natalé, 2011). (9) Kayapo video project by Terence Turner (Shepard, 2012). (10) AOM 2016 Conference Presentation “Jean-Luc Nancy and the promise of corporeal ethics” (Korchagina & Pullen, 2016).

comparison, referred to as the “cocktail analogy,” British scholar David Miller (1993) represents the complex Higgs boson phenomenon in the simplest way possible (see Image 3 in Figure 2). The analogy was used to convey the idea that, like a celebrity at a cocktail party, an elementary particle’s navigation through the Higgs field will depend on its mass. When a celebrity (a particle) enters a cocktail party (Higgs field), he or she compels the other guests to come closer (distortion of the field around the Higgs boson particle). This results in the celebrity finding it harder to stop moving, or once stopped, harder to begin moving again due to the clustering process (similar to Higgs boson acquiring a greater mass and momentum).

As demonstrated in this example, creative mediums such as analogies and metaphors (Shrivastava & Mitroff, 1984) help overcome a third barrier to research representation: the difficulty in translating complex social science topics into digestible pieces of practical information. Like the physics and astronomy scholar David Miller, management researchers can also build on the evocative form of analogies, or more largely creative mediums, to simplify concepts and reach a broader audience. Through this process of repackaging ideas into formats that promote understanding (Newman, Cherney, & Head, 2016), creative mediums open the doors for new “trading zones” (Romme et al., 2015, p. 544), that is, spaces for encounters between people from different horizons and paradigms, to emerge and allow for the “spiraling process of interactions between explicit and tacit knowledge” (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 42, referring to Nonaka, 1994).

When a TED Talk Makes Statistics Come Alive: Creative Mediums Spark Contemporary and Inclusive Dialogues

With almost 12,000,000 views, Hans Rosling’s famous TED Talk, “The Best Stats You’ve Ever Seen,” brings 40 years worth of U.N. statistics on the population, life expectancy, and family size of nations to life. Through an animated motion chart, made possible by the software he created, Rosling dynamically demonstrates the shrinking gap in prosperity and health between the developing and Western countries while engaging the non-familiar audience in the story told by the data (Rosling, 2006). As shown in the collage (see Image 6 in Figure 1), even after the presentation, hundreds of people still actively discuss the research via 140-character comments on Rosling’s Twitter page (Rosling, 2017). With the help of creative mediums, Rosling managed to not only convey information in a condensed fashion but also elicit ongoing audience engagement through the instantaneous and participatory nature of social media, which has changed the communication landscape (Qualman, 2010). In this way, Rosling overcame a fourth barrier to research dissemination:

the asynchronicity between traditional reporting and contemporary communication.

The recent revolution in communication has morphed knowledge consumers from idle bystanders into active co-creators who propel discussions. They are now at the center of the multidirectional communication process (Thackeray & Neiger, 2009). In line with this new way of communication, research findings should be presented in an inviting way, abridged to fit the consumer (Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2006). Research dissemination in this context should support a culture of dialogue and nurture joint interpretation while keeping in mind the processual aspect of research (Mohrman, Gibson, & Mohrman, 2001).

Let’s Perform and Paint!

Answering a call to “break out of the closed loop” (Hambrick, 1994, p. 13) of research representation in management and appeal to a broader audience, we have reviewed how creative mediums, namely a photo, a picture collage, an analogy, and a social media page can enhance traditional research representation (see Table 1 for synthesis).

These mediums are just a few that can trigger interest, foster a multisensory experience, convey complex meaning, and spark contemporary, inclusive dialogues. As management researchers, we need to take the first step to make this impact possible. Therefore, we encourage graduate students, authors writing papers, researchers presenting at conferences, conference organizers, and those involved in the journal editing process to utilize creative mediums. For instance, graduate students can think of creative ways to showcase their dissertation work through artistic performance, much like the “Dance Your PhD” contest participants have (Bohannon, 2017). Researchers presenting at conferences can use visuals to enhance their Power Point presentations as Natalia Korchagina and Alison Pullen did at the 2016 Academy of Management Conference (see Image 10 in Figure 1); they showed artwork (animated images, paintings, and pictures) to convey the deconstructionist position and writing style of the author they were studying—post-modern French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. In the footsteps of Adler and Delbecq (2018, p. 3) who designed an “aesthetic leadership reflection” articulating paintings, texts, and mindfulness, authors should “go beyond words” to holistically “engage the head and the heart” of the readership. Conference organizers can consider creating tracks for presentations using creative mediums as the organizers of the Association for Consumer Research Conference did with the Videography Track. Finally, those involved in the journal process could include short videos as suggested by Champoux (1999) like those produced by the *Academy of Management Discoveries* journal; their 2-min-long white board videos, posted on YouTube, explain complex social science research and allow all viewers to like, share, and comment on the content. We

Table 1. Four Illustrated Rationales for Using Creative Mediums to Overcome Barriers to Research Representation.

| Examples of previous creative medium utilization (as featured in our collage) | Claim about creative mediums and research representation | Barriers to research representation addressed |
|--|--|---|
| <p><i>Image 9—Kayapo video project by Terence Turner (Shepard, 2012)</i></p> <p>With the support of a photo, illustrating the sharp contrast between a modern device and the tribal environment where it was used, the anthropologist Terence Turner created an association between the seemingly mundane features of a camera and the extraordinary environment of the Kayapo tribe.</p> | Creative mediums trigger interest by renewing perspectives on what is taken for granted or has been forgotten about under social modern constraints. | A paucity of traditional mediums to inherently trigger interest in external audiences. |
| <p><i>Image 1—Autoethnography collage by Paula Gerstenblatt (Gerstenblatt, 2013)</i></p> <p>Through the use of a visual aid, Paula Gerstenblatt helps the audience perceive, conceptualize, and relate to her study at an emotional level.</p> | Weaving together words and images opens a new world of meaning to the audience by helping them integrate intellectual thoughts with emotional reactions, creating a sum greater than each component. | An inability of traditional material to go beyond cognitive abilities and bring in emotions and feelings. |
| <p><i>Image 3—The cocktail party analogy on Higgs boson, David Miller (Jepsen, 2013)</i></p> <p>British physics and astronomy scholar David Miller (1993) came up with an analogy to represent the complex Higgs boson phenomenon in the simplest way possible by explaining it via a cocktail party analogy.</p> | Management researchers can build on the evocative form of analogies, or more largely creative mediums, to simplify concepts and reach a broader audience. | A difficulty in “translating” complex social science topics into digestible bits of practical information. |
| <p><i>Image 6—Twitter feed of Hans Rosling (2017)</i></p> <p>In his famous TED Talk, Rosling dynamically engages a non-familiar audience demonstrating the shrinking gap in prosperity/health between developing and Western countries (Rosling, 2006); even years after the initial presentation, individuals engage in an ongoing discussion about his research on Twitter (Rosling, 2017)</p> | Creative mediums allow for information to be conveyed in a condensed fashion while eliciting audience engagement. | The asynchronicity between traditional reporting and the instantaneous and participatory nature of contemporary communication, especially social media. |

encourage management scholars to consider these suggestions as inspiration, perhaps to use them simultaneously, and start performing or painting!

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the organizers and presenters of the *JMI & Generative Curiosity Workshop* at the Western Academy of Management’s 2016 meetings. We are grateful to our fellow workshop participant, Aysegul Karaeminogullari, and all other participants who provided feedback and support. The authors also thank the editor and reviewers for their developmental feedback, which greatly improved the article. Finally, we are grateful to the authors of the creative pieces who granted authorization to display their work in this article. All errors or omissions are the authors’ responsibility.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. This reversible research poem is inspired by Chanie Gorkin’s poem “Worst Day Ever” which was published in poetrynation.com in 2015.

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