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Citation: Alexy, O., Berchicci, L., Dowell, G., Jarzabkowski, P., Langley, A., Moschieri, C. & Nigam, A. (2022). SO! Far, SO! Good: Strategic Organization at 20. *Strategic Organization*, 20(4), pp. 677-682. doi: 10.1177/14761270221137160

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14761270221137160>

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SO! Far, SO! Good: Strategic Organization at Twenty

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By their own account, Joel Baum, Royston Greenwood and Dev Jennings (Baum et al., 2022) founded *Strategic Organization* twenty years ago to counter what they saw as a disturbing trend. Namely, they perceived that scholarship on strategy and scholarship on organization were becoming increasingly separate, leading to distinct journals, professional associations and research agendas underpinned by different disciplines (economics vs. sociology), and differentially dominant in different areas of the world. Believing that this increasing differentiation might lead to impoverished understanding of important phenomena, *Strategic Organization's* founding mission was to support convergence at the intersection of strategy and organization, bridging disciplines, methods, perspectives and geographies.

Since then, although *Strategic Organization* has grown and evolved, it has remained faithful to its founding mission as reflected in the content of regular issues, in the mix of intellectual backgrounds of our editors and editorial board, and in our special issue themes that inhabit and enrich the intersection between strategy and organization theory. These themes include, for example, “Strategic responses to institutional complexity” (Vermeulen et al., 2016); “Firms, crowds and innovation,” (Felin et al., 2017); “Exploring the strategy-identity nexus” (Ravasi et al., 2020); “Temporal work: The strategic organization of time” (Bansal et al., 2022); “Categories and place: Identities, materiality and movements” (forthcoming) (David et al., 2020), “Research frontiers on the attention-based view of the firm” (forthcoming) (Ocasio et al., 2021), and “Impact driven strategy research for grand challenges” (deadline for submissions November 30, 2022 (Williams et al., 2022)).

The So!apbox Essay format is another longstanding tradition at *Strategic Organization*, launched in 2003 by the founding editors who described the format in their opening editorial as follows: “A soapbox is a platform used by a self-appointed, spontaneous, or informal orator, or, more broadly, an outlet for delivering opinions. These editorial essays provide a forum in which interdisciplinary bridges can be built, methodological traditions discussed, and the field of strategic organization staked out.” (Baum et al., 2003: 7). So!apbox essays have become a little longer over time (the word limit has shifted from 2,500 to 6,000 words), and varied in their orientation – some more phenomenon-oriented, some more theoretical, and some methodological – but they have tracked the field, continuously debating concepts, ideas, methods and issues at the intersection of strategy and organization. Some have been collected together in So!apbox Debates around themes such as dynamic capabilities (2009), the financial crisis (2010), climate change (2011), and strategy as practice (2008; 2016), while others have been brought together as Special Forums on topics such as the business model concept (Coff et al., 2013), configurational methods (David et al., 2018), paradox and dialectics (Berchicci et al., 2019), qualitative methods (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021b), and radical sustainability (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021a).

By stimulating reflection about where the field has been and where it might or should be heading, the So!apbox essay format is an ideal way to celebrate and take stock at key milestone moments such as anniversaries. Thus, the journal’s fifth anniversary was celebrated in 2007 with a So!apbox Issue including 11 invited essays from members of the editorial board (Baum et al., 2007), and the tenth Anniversary Issue in 2012 included 15 such essays (Coff et al., 2012), many of which have been highly cited. We follow this tradition for this 20th Anniversary Issue that includes 16 essays involving 31 authors (14 men; 17 women). Many of these authors have contributed to the journal in the past, either by writing articles or essays, or by serving as editors

or editorial board members, as well as reviewers. A few are new to the journal. The authors were invited on the basis of their past contributions to particular topics and theories at the intersection of strategy and organization, and for their visions of the future. They have provided us with a rich palette of ideas and insights that we hope you will enjoy.

Contributions to the Anniversary Issue

The 20th Anniversary Issue begins with a retrospective of the journal *Strategic Organization* and of the field of strategic organization by the journal's founders Joel Baum, Royston Greenwood and Dev Jennings (2022). We thank them sincerely for engaging in this exercise on the occasion of the journal's 20th anniversary. The authors track the evolution of the journal and the field by examining and comparing the content of the major strategy and organization journals over time, finding that subsequent editors of *Strategic Organization* have built on and developed their aspirations in fruitful ways (pew!). They note, however, opportunities to broaden perspectives to consider new organizational designs, emerging socio-political trends, and widening societal concerns, arguing that these may need to be addressed through novel methods that step outside the common "templates" dominant in the field. As current editors, these directions make sense to us. As we shall see, many of the essays included in the current issue are also pushing in similar directions.

The first set of essays considers different strands of organization theory often linked to strategy. It offers insight into how they might be developed to enhance their contribution to the theoretical understanding of both organizational and strategic issues. Thus, Henrich Greve and Cyndi-Man Zhang (2022) review insights derived from the behavioral theory of the firm, and argue for building on these to investigate the role of organizational structure, decision makers, history, and organizational environments in strategy making. Robert David (coeditor 2016-2019)

and Yoojin Lee (2022) review scholarship on market categories, and propose greater emphasis on agency in category spanning, and more attention to the links with institutional logics, and categories as organizational outcomes, rather than inputs. Linda Rouleau and Charlotte Cloutier (2022) review work associated with the strategy-as-practice stream of research, and argue that it could enhance its impact by taking more seriously the practice-based theories that initially underpinned its development, building on the notion of knowledgeability as central to strategic practices.

The second set of essays considers topics that are all to one degree or another connected to the organizational resources and capabilities that underpin strategic advantage. Constance Helfat (2022) revisits the notion of dynamic capabilities, and argues for greater consideration of what she calls “external-facing” dynamic capabilities that may or may not involve resource reconfiguration, but that can nevertheless enable firms to adapt to or shape their external environments. Paola Cillo and Gianmario Verona (coeditor, 2016-2017) (2022) synthesize the vast literature on innovation, pointing out how the strategic organization of innovation can no longer be seen as a narrowly defined function but rather penetrates all aspects of the organization with implications for sustainability and digitalization. Yuliya Snihur and Kathleen Eisenhardt (2022) review research on the business model concept, arguing that business models may replace strategy as the key consideration in understanding sources of competitive advantage by incorporating systemic relations among elements of the firm and its environment. Finally, addressing the issue of digitalization head on, Samer Faraj and Paul Leonardi (2022) invite us to reconsider the concept of technology as a relational phenomenon intertwined with organizing in complex ways. They argue that this has implications for the boundaries of the firm, the nature of innovation and organizational knowing.

While the second set of essays expands our understanding of resources, capabilities and technologies, often reaching beyond the firm's boundaries, the third set of contributions focuses in one way or another on the human and political dimensions of strategy and organization. Margarethe Wiersema and Haeyoung Koo (2022) identify three key trends disrupting received views of firm governance: the rise of index funds, activist hedge funds, and a shift from shareholder to stakeholder dominance, all requiring a reorientation in research agendas as well. Flore Bridoux and J.W. Stoelhorst (2022) deepen the analysis of the stakeholder view of the firm that, though originally developed in the 1980s and 1990s, has only recently begun to receive serious attention from the strategy field. They offer new research directions that can capture the intertwined economic and moral imperatives surrounding the firm. Brayden King and James Jasper (2022) take a strategic interaction perspective derived from sociology, proposing to broaden consideration of stakeholder interactions to the “strategic issue arena” level, integrating thinking about nonmarket strategy and the role of social movements.

As we can see, these essays confirm the push for strategic organization scholarship to reach beyond the confines of the firm itself towards a broader consideration of its socio-political environment. The fourth set of essays pursues this move further, opening up attention to societal issues that in the past were often viewed as peripheral to the interests of the firm. Thus, Majken Schultz (2022) examines the nexus between organizational identity and strategy and argues that their temporal interplay may play a critical role in enabling firms to address societal issues such as climate change. Organizational change scholars, Jean Bartunek and Julia Balogun (2022) point out how relational, interpretive and physical spaces for organization-community interactions can be critical to ensuring sustainable collective solutions to grand challenges. Finally, as theorists of routine dynamics, Martha Feldman and Brian Pentland (2022) inject a

critical twist into our thinking about strategy and organization by showing how organizational routines may inadvertently contribute to sustaining deep social inequalities (e.g., related to race and gender) within organizations and society. The routine dynamics perspective nevertheless offers a pathway towards understanding not only how everyday actions can generate patterns of inequality but also how changing those actions might offer potential for amelioration.

The two essays that we left to the end of the 20th Anniversary Issue are very different from the rest and from each other, but in some ways, both offer the strongest challenges to the field and to our scholarship. Gerald Davis and Theodore DeWitt (2022) recognize the changes resulting from trends such as digitalization and increasing interdependence among organizations and society in a planet with limited resources. However, they argue that the issue is not simply one of studying new firm strategies (based on data designed to capture the old economy), but of entirely rethinking our frameworks and units of analysis. As they put it, “What do we do if our main objects of study stop being objects?” Davis and DeWitt (2022) end on an upbeat though provocative, ambitious, and challenging note by arguing that strategic organization scholars are best placed to contribute to finding new ways to design rules of the game that might create an arena in which firms and organizations participate positively in resolving societal problems.

Many of the essays we have included in this special 20th Anniversary Issue orient us towards new and intriguing research agendas, pinpointing “hot topics” for future study. This is all highly stimulating and certain to encourage scholars to launch new research programs that can address those issues. The final essay by Siobhan O’Mahony and Susan Cohen (2022) does, however, place some of this enthusiasm in perspective by considering the promise and perils of studying hot topics. They note that investing in emerging topic areas can be rewarding, but also challenging as concepts tend to be fluid and undefined, with many competing perspectives as

bandwagons can wax and wane, leaving readers skeptical and confused. The authors offer some interesting ways to manage these challenges. As editors of *Strategic Organization*, we would not, however, want to discourage scholars from addressing important new research directions suggested here and elsewhere. As some of our authors have suggested, *Strategic Organization* is a journal where experimentation and creativity are not only allowed, but encouraged.

Conclusions

Overall, the authors of the essays included in this Anniversary Issue confirm the trends that Baum et al. (2022) cited as promising directions for the journal and the field. The awareness and emphasis on the importance of social issues as relevant to strategic organization is, however, particularly striking given the history of strategic management scholarship. While previous So!apbox essays published in the journal over the years have called for increased attention to such issues (Bapuji and Neville, 2015; Vaara and Durand, 2012; Whittington, 2012; Bansal and DesJardine, 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2021a), there is a sense in which they are now becoming more mainstream. In particular, scholars are no longer simply calling for attention to such concerns in the abstract, but are undertaking empirical research on them, and integrating these considerations into their understandings of other phenomena such as governance (Wiersema and Koo, 2022) organizational identity (Schultz, 2022), innovation (Cillo and Verona, 2022), organizational change (Bartunek and Balogun, 2022) and routines (Feldman and Pentland, 2022). We expect to see this integration and development intensified in the future.

As editors of *Strategic Organization*, we are proud of what has been accomplished in the journal's first 20 years. So far, so good! We also look forward to building on and participating in the trends our essayists have laid out for us in the future, while remaining open to other emerging perspectives that build on our mission to understand organizing and strategizing in today's

complex world. This complexity is only likely to be intensified in the future, as technological developments (Davis and DeWitt, 2022; Faraj and Leonardi, 2022), along with emerging socio-political and ecological trends (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021a) shift our understanding of what organizations are, and what they can and should be doing. True to the mission of *Strategic Organization*, we firmly believe that finding answers to the questions these and other developments raise will continue to require scholarship that bridges boundaries between disciplines, methods, perspectives, and geographies.

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