Taking Stock, Looking Ahead: Editors’ Introduction to the Inaugural Organization & Environment Review Issue

Stephanie Bertels1 and Frances Bowen2

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In summer 2015, the Organizations and the Natural Environment Division of the Academy of Management will celebrate the 20th anniversary of its first formal conference program back in 1995. Over the past two decades, a vibrant and engaged scholarly community has generated thousands of empirical and conceptual studies on the complex relationships between organizations and their natural and social environments. Each individual study focuses on specific research questions crafted to meet the rigorous requirements of academic journals. However, too often our journal publishing and professional norms push us to focus on small, incremental contributions to knowledge. Anniversaries can remind us to pause, take stock, and build on the past to shape a new future. The Organization & Environment (O&E) editorial board decided to provide a venue for this anniversary celebration: a special issue where as a community of scholars we can reflect on where we have been, what we have learned, and what remains to be understood to both further our field and help society address pressing environmental challenges.

In this first review issue of O&E, we hoped to draw insight and inspiration from in-depth reviews of specific topics. Our call for articles invited authors to reflect on the state of theory, empirical research, and practice in relation to key questions at the interface of organizations and the natural environment. We sought out comprehensive and analytical reviews of recent research that synthesized, integrated, and extended our thinking. We encouraged authors to anchor their thoughts in detailed retrospection on past and current research, and to identify the key theoretical, empirical, methodological, or practical challenges of future O&E research. There was an enthusiastic response from the community of scholars and in the end, we have assembled a group of six articles.1 Each offers a stand-alone review of a particular phenomenon within the O&E domain. Together they showcase the wide range of scholarship addressing topics ranging from the macro to the micro foundations of our field.

Beginning at the macro end of the spectrum, Hoffman and Jennings (2015) alert us to the challenges of our own making as they introduce the concept of the Anthropocene to our scholarly conversation. By asking us to contemplate the implications of the permanent and unprecedented stratospheric and geologic impacts that we as humans are having on our planet, they connect the

1Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
2Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

Corresponding Author:
Frances Bowen, Chair in Innovation Studies, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London, E1 4NS, UK. Email: f.bowen@qmul.ac.uk
physical changes of what has come to be called the Anthropocene Era to the social and institutional responses that these changes may engender in the development of an Anthropocene Society. For the institutional theorists among us, their review both echoes and answers recent calls to attend more to contestation and complexity (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011) and to learn from extreme settings (Martí & Fernández, 2013). Hoffman and Jennings (2015) lay out a research agenda that calls upon institutional theorists to contemplate a profound shift in the relationship between humans and their planet to better understand how our society may come to recognize the implications of the Anthropocene and to help inform our response. For all O&E scholars, this article reconnects us to our core mission and asks, “How can our scholarship help support a transition to a society that respects core planetary boundaries?”

Moving down to the level of inter-firm action and industrial systems, Paquin and Walls (2015) explore the topic of industrial symbiosis wherein firms share or exchange their by-products, materials, energy, or waste to reduce their collective environmental impact. These authors bring particular attention to the social and organizational factors influencing the development and success of systems and clusters of industrial symbiosis. Through their review, they identify antecedents, consequences, lubricants, and limiters at the institutional, network/system, organizational, and individual levels of analysis. Their review points to important gaps in our understanding of the diffusion of industrial symbiosis practices, capitalizing on network diversity, the role of intermediaries, and the role of co-location and proximity. They also raise important questions about collective benefits and the development of collective capabilities as well as the role of individuals as champions. Given that environmental problems are so often systemic in nature, additional attention to intra-firm cooperation will be fruitful area for further research going forward.

In the first of our three articles at the firm level, Van der Byl and Slawinski (2015) review how organizations and managers address the tensions that arise when economic, social, and environmental goals diverge. They identify four primary lenses, both in practice and in theory: win–win, trade-off, integrative, and paradox approaches. In updating Margolis and Walsh’s (2003) canonical review, Van der Byl and Slawinski had hoped to see a shift over time in our field’s research emphasis from avoiding tensions through win–win framing or managing them through trade-offs to more integrative approaches. They did find some evidence of integrative lenses and an emerging paradox approach to sustainability, but the literature is still dominated by win–win and trade-off approaches. Van der Byl and Slawinski (2015) challenge us to design empirical studies on how firms can use sustainability tensions to generate new futures without simply avoiding tensions or balancing conflicting demands. Only then can we support practitioners to move beyond win–win and trade-off approaches, and support them in thinking holistically about sustainability and its many complexities.

Turning our attention to a specific strategic domain at the firm level, Hahn, Reimsbach, and Scheimann (2015) focus on carbon disclosure. They emphasize the importance of institutional context, or what they term frame conditions in this domain, particularly whether carbon disclosure is voluntary or mandatory. The review highlights the dominance of an output rather than outcome perspective in the carbon disclosure literature so far: They found many more studies addressing managers’ disclosure and carbon performance measurement choices than studies examining the economic or ecological outcomes of carbon disclosure. Hahn et al.’s (IN PRESS) review reminds us to keep an eye on the prize in future carbon disclosure research. We should renew our efforts to explore the role of carbon disclosure in actually reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Lyon and Montgomery’s (in press) review of The Means and End of Greenwash picks up Hahn et al.’s (2015) theme of environmental communications that overstate firms’ environmental performance. Building on a continuing conversation in this journal (Bowen & Aragon-Correa, 2014), Lyon and Montgomery argue for a broader notion of greenwash and encourage us to focus on the many ways in which greenwash occurs. Their central contribution is to identify several “varieties of
greenwash” from the organizational theory, economics, and marketing literatures. These range
from varieties familiar to the O&E community such as decoupling and selective disclosure, to
varieties that are so far underexplored in our research such as astroturfing and costly state falsi-

cification. Lyon and Montgomery provide a platform for future work investigating the nature and
consequences of greenwashing, which could inform a broader interdisciplinary dialogue on
deception. (Due to space considerations, this article will appear in the next regular issue of O&E,
but it is an integral part of this inaugural review paper project.)

Finally, at the micro end of the spectrum, Norton, Parker, Hannes, and Ashkanasy (2015) take
us into the realm of employee green behaviour. Like Hahn et al. (2015) in the carbon disclosure
domain, Norton et al. (2015) make an important distinction between required and voluntary
behaviours. They review what is known about how factors at the institutional, organizational,
team, and leadership levels both influence and are influenced by these two types of green
employee behaviour. They find that the majority of research has focused on the antecedents of
green behaviour and mostly on the personal characteristics of employees. It should come as no
surprise then that their multilevel examination points to the need for scholars to undertake more
cross-level research that delves into the mechanisms and processes through which higher level
antecedents affect the behaviours of employees, thinking both about with-person and between-
person considerations. These authors also call on the O&E community to pay more heed to the
outcomes of green behaviours in the workplace and point to the need to move beyond cross-
sectional, self-reported studies and instead to consider more longitudinal and even experimental
studies as a means to further our understanding of the dynamics of employee green behaviour.

Taken together, this set of reviews covers a wide scholarly terrain within O&E scholarship.
Our discussion here has ordered the article along the primary level of analysis of the focal phe-
nomenon, ranging from the global (Hoffman & Jennings, 2015), through the inter-firm (Paquin
& Walls, 2015), to the firm (Hahn et al., 2015; Lyon & Montgomery, in press; Van der Byl &
Slawinski, 2015), and to the individual levels (Norton et al. 2015). However, several of the arti-
cles note how these levels are more accurately nested within each other, echoing Perey’s (2014)
call to identify cross-level mechanisms that may be tapped for broader systemic change.

The articles in this issue also span the range of management theories applied to sustainability
questions, particularly institutional theory, stakeholder theory, economic theories, and strategic
choice. Anchoring analysis to established organizational theories helps identify gaps and future
research directions (Hahn et al., 2015, Table 1; Paquin & Walls, 2015, Table 2). Some sustain-
bility topics also provide an opening for interdisciplinary dialogue on socially and theoretically
important phenomena, as Lyon and Montgomery (in press) indicate in the case of greenwashing.
However, we were particularly pleased to attract articles that build on Starik and Kanashiro’s
(2013) proto-theory of sustainability management. Hoffman and Jennings (2015), for example,
embrace the implications of connecting physical and social systems, challenging institutional
theorists to expand their frame to accommodate the new social reality of the Anthropocene. Van
der Byl and Slawinski (2015) explicitly address the multiple tensions of corporate sustainability
and how a paradox lens may shed light on persistent and unresolvable tensions within sustain-
ability management.

Finally, we also find that as our field begins to mature, so must our methodological approaches.
The reviews presented here make some common calls for work that is more systematically com-
parative, that is more longitudinal and process oriented and that explores the linkages between
micro-, meso-, and macro levels of analysis. In some ways, these calls are not surprising, since
they echo similar calls in organizational scholarship more generally (Bono & McNamara, 2011).
What we found perhaps more surprising was the attention to the methodology of systematic
review that was expressed by our reviewer pool. Our reviewers were very attentive to the meth-
ods undertaken to conduct these reviews, showing interest in how the searches were conducted,
which keywords informed the searches, and how authors made decisions about inclusion and
exclusion. They were also consistent in pushing these authors to fairly represent the findings of prior work, holding them to account when they felt that readers might draw inappropriate conclusions about what we do and do not know based on prior work. The result is a set of articles applying the latest thinking on the conduct of systematic reviews (Rousseau, Manning, & Denyer, 2008; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003), complemented by a more speculative forward-looking review of institutionalism in the Anthropocene where the evidence base is not yet sufficiently robust to support a systematic review.

Taken together, these reviews show how far the O&E field has travelled over the past 20 years. We are beginning to develop a strong set of shoulders upon which to stand and view the path ahead. These reviews showcase our field’s significant contribution to understanding businesses’ role in sustainability, and society’s ability to address crucial sustainability challenges. They also provide research challenges and inspiration to help with the important task of shifting our institutions, our organizations and our personal behaviours to be able to live within the ecological limits of our planet.

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Note

1. Due to page length considerations, Lyon and Montgomery’s (in press) review article on “The Means and Ends of Greenwash” will appear in the next regular issue of O&E. However, we have included this article in our editors’ introduction because it is an integral part of the set of articles in this inaugural review issue project.

References


**Author Biographies**

**Stephanie Bertels** is an Associate Professor at Simon Fraser University’s Beedie School of Business. Stephanie studies how organizations make the transition towards sustainability by undertaking practitioner informed research on sustainable operations, embedding sustainability and sustainable innovation.

**Frances Bowen** is Professor of Innovation Studies and Director of Research at Queen Mary University of London’s School of Business and Management. She is currently president of GRONEN, the Group for Research on Organisations and the Natural Environment, and Past Division Chair of the Organizations and Natural Environment (ONE) Division of the Academy of Management.