

The Semiotic Corporation: An Introduction to the Supplement Issue

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ABSTRACT

The business corporation is explored as a reflexive cultural form shaped through complex and ongoing sign processes. The concern specifically is with the dynamic whereby external representations become internal to the corporation, shaping its form and operations, and, correspondingly, internally produced representations get projected outward into the world, mingling with other representations to influence how the corporation is construed. Seven contributions to this *Signs and Society* supplement are organized along a continuum—from the point of what is metaphorically conceptualized as the *origo* to the terminus, that is, from those studying the corporation as shaped through external representations, on the one end, to those presenting a view of how the corporation emerges through representations it projects outward on the other end.

In an inquiry into corporate legal personhood and the US Supreme Court's *Citizen's United* decision, Backer (2012, 105) remarked: the corporation "shimmers with meanings that from a distance appear solid and yet which, on closer inspection, dissolve into a dynamic complex of interlocking and interacting signification." His insight echoes the idea that motivates this sup-

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plement issue of *Signs and Society*. Viewing the modern business corporation as a cultural form that is shaped in relation to the various cultural contexts in which it operates, we seek to examine how the seemingly bounded corporate form emerges out of complex sign processes. We are especially concerned with the dynamic whereby external representations become internal to the corporation and, correspondingly, internally circulating representations get projected outward.

Researchers have long used concepts and methods derived from sign theory to analyze various aspects of business operations. One particularly important area for semiotic analysis has been advertising. The First International Conference on Marketing and Semiotics, in fact, took place in 1986 at Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management. Papers from the conference were published in a volume edited by Jean Umiker-Sebeok (1987), which included Thomas Sebeok's "Messages in the Marketplace," John Sherry's "Marketing as a Cultural System," and Chantal Cinquin's "Homo Coca-Colens: From Marketing to Semiotics and Politics." Like Erving Goffman's (1979) earlier work on *Gender Advertisements*, however, these studies were concerned only incidentally with the corporation as a semiotically constructed cultural form. Goffman trained his analytical lens on gender differentiation as manifested in publicly occurring signs. His examination of advertising photographs concerned one such class of signs. Correspondingly, semiotic studies of advertising tend to foreground the relationship of the sign to the product represented or to the consumer (Mick 1986; Kehret-Ward 1988; Nöth 1988).

More recent studies of brands and branding (Moore 2003; Danesi 2006; Thellefsen et al. 2006; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; Manning 2010, 2012; Thellefsen and Sørensen 2013), however, take the sign to represent not just a product but a whole business enterprise. Indeed, corporate branding forms one extreme—the terminus, we might call it—of the continuum along which the articles in this supplement issue are arrayed. This is the endpoint of semiotic construction in which the corporation already exists. It projects representations of itself outward, thereby defining simultaneously its interiority as an organization and also its relation to other entities in the world exterior to it.

In this supplement issue, the terminus is most closely approximated by Asif Agha's contribution, "Tropes of Branding in Forms of Life." Agha points out that the alleged power of brands to accomplish certain social effects—for instance, the effect whereby a trademark "points to" the corporate owner—is not a function of an independent law. Rather, the effect depends on distinct

and locale-specific metasemiotic frameworks. These frameworks regiment (as well as facilitate) reanalysis of how the brand (or, more precisely, “brand fraction”), through “brand formulations,” stands in relation to locally salient meanings. The implication is that unless the various metasemiotic frameworks that govern the interpretation of all brand fractions remain consistent, a possibility undercut by locally specific formulations, brand semiosis naturally involves people engaging “in behaviors that recycle elements of brands into things that look like counterfeits and fakes to outsiders, but are treated in altogether different ways by those whose behaviors these are.” The owner of brands (such as a corporation), hence, only comes to be acknowledged through brands if interpretations of the relationship between the brand fractions and the object are strongly and consistently controlled by the metasemiotic discourse of law (e.g., trademark law).

At the terminus represented by Agha’s article, the corporation is presupposed, already existent; it is an agent in the world, capable of collective action. The signs produced by it enter an external reality filled with other representations, and its signs jostle with other signs, competing with one another in the midst of local metasemiotic frameworks, as Agha describes. The semiotic trajectory is from the inside of a bounded entity outward although the externally projected signs may refract the image of the corporation rather than bringing it into sharp focus.

At the other pole in our conceptualization—the *origo*, let’s call it—the external world enters into the corporation and gives shape to its inner world. This happens at the legal plane when papers are filed and conceptual reality is given to an entity that might otherwise be inchoate and or even without substance. Of course, business enterprises also arise through self-organization even prior to legal incorporation, such as in the case of self-proprietor businesses that gradually grow and undergo incorporation, or criminal organizations such as drug cartels that are never legally incorporated. Even in these latter cases, however, internal characteristics are modeled on already existent forms in the wider world in which the new entity originates.

We do not, in this volume, have an article tracing the semiotic act of creation, the birth of a corporate entity. We do, however, have examples of how the world of outside representations enters into and shapes inner workings. Perhaps closest to this *origo* is Eitan Wilf’s piece, “Ritual Semiosis in the Business Corporation: Recruitment to Routinized Innovation.” Wilf focuses on a New York-based innovation consultancy group that conducts workshops for other corporations. The group specializes in teaching business managers

how to innovate routinely, so that they can implement the procedures inside their own corporations. Here is an excellent example of signs coming from outside a corporation's boundary—in this case, coming from an external consulting group—and shaping its inner workings.

The workshops conducted by consultants differ from routine in-house corporate training sessions in the higher degree to which organizers engage in reflexive corporate-metacultural activities. In the workshops, the consultants employ various strategies to bring participants into a participation framework and help them learn modes of embodying and inhabiting what he calls the "professional ethos" of creativity.

Wilf's study reveals that workshop participants, through the learning they acquire from outside their own corporations, come to appreciate that innovation processes can be mechanized and routinized at the level of the group. In the "romantic" version of creativity, in which a single originator is the owner of the creation, the result can be a stubborn fixedness and failure to come up with practical solutions. By distinguishing the "facilitator" of creativity from the "owner," individuals can work together more effectively to collectively produce solutions to problems the group confronts.

Wilf argues that, in these workshops, participants engage in "business corporate ritual semiosis." They reaffirm in the here and now a central corporate value—namely, that corporations should be innovators, effecting changes internally and in the surrounding world. The article thus also illustrates the importation into the corporation of a "metaculture of newness" (Urban 2001, 67), the effect of which is to alter the everyday activities inside the corporation, transforming the organization's capacity for creativity and adaptation.

If Wilf's essay comes the closest, among those in this volume, to the *origo* of our semiotic continuum, in which the corporation is created and shaped by signs coming in from the outside, and Agha's essay the terminus, in which the corporation acts as an agent to produce signs that then mingle with other signs in an external world, the contribution by Greg Urban ("Symbolic Force: A Corporate Revitalization Video and Its Effects") most closely approximates the dead center. Urban takes the corporation—in this case, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle company—as an established entity in the world. He analyzes a motivational video produced by the company that was originally designed for internal purposes: to reaffirm the group's solidarity and continuity through time. In this sense, the video is reminiscent of a "dominant" ritual symbol, conceptualized by anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) as a

complex sign that represents the social group—in this case, the corporation—to itself.¹

However, Urban is not content to leave the matter at the boundary of the group. He observes that the video escaped outward into the world as it was gradually picked up by distributors and placed on their websites. Moreover, he himself acted as an agent to move the video outside the intended boundary of the corporation's stakeholders. Showing the video to a range of individuals at varying distances from the corporation, he elicited through interviews their responses, endeavoring to assess the affective impact of the video. He finds that interviewees pick up on and respond to the symbol differently: some more positively, others more negatively.

Urban's broader concern is with the "forces" that affect the motion of representations of a collectivity. He suggests that the kind of force operative in the case of the video is that of "interest." Different interviewees were either oriented toward or away from the corporation depending on their individual interests and interpretations of specific semiotic components. For some viewers, for example, the images of Main Street America evoked warm feelings of American small town life, while for others specific shots (e.g., the bearded face of a white male) produced a jarringly "not-me experience" and, consequently, a rejection of the video's intended efficacy. The video, as a representation of the corporation to itself (i.e., to its stakeholders), thus appears to perform a "gate-keeping function, helping to create and maintain" group boundaries.

Two articles, those by Alexandra Michel and Michael M. Prentice, occupy the space in our continuum between the *origo* (representations entering into the corporation from the outside and shaping its inner workings) and dead center (corporations producing signs for their own internal purposes). Michel's essay, "Dualism at Work: The Social Circulation of Embodiment Theories in Use," examines two large Wall Street banks. Hers is very much an exploration of the inner life of a corporation. In a remarkable longitudinal ethnographic study, she tracks four cohorts over the course of thirteen years, probing the Cartesian mind-body dualism in a business context. Wall

1. A number of prior studies have dealt with the internal semiotic construction of corporations and other organizations. Fiol (1989), for example, examined the representations of corporations through textual analysis of CEOs' letters to shareholders. Not focused on corporations per se, but nevertheless also of interest, is Hankins's (2013) chapter on the management of signs in relationship to the creation and maintenance of organizational forms. Hancock (2005) provides a semiotic approach to organizational aesthetics. Broadly concerned with symbolism inside corporations is also Jones (1996).

Street banks are notorious for the long work hours to which employees are subjected—often 80 to 120 hours per week. Through interviews and ethnographic observations, Michel explores how employees understand and relate to their own bodies under these stressful conditions.

At first blush, Michel seems to be dealing with an entirely corporation-internal study, something close to our dead center on the continuum; but her actual target is closer to our *origo*. She views the orientation of workers to their bodies as an importation into the financial workplace of ideas pertaining to Cartesian dualism, which she understands as “the identification of the person with the mind and its separation from the body as the mind’s unproblematic instrument.” She notes that such dualistic ideas have been “circulating through Western culture” since the seventeenth century, a phenomenon studied in some depth by Benjamin Lee (1997) in his major work *Talking Heads*. It has perhaps entered the corporate realm as an articulated notion only more recently, with one bank vice president, for example, formulating the mind-body split this way: “There are no such things as physical needs. Tell me one physical need and I can tell you a culture in which they have controlled it.”

In part as a way to overcome criticisms of the ultimately physically damaging nature of such long work hours, bank managers have introduced another notion from the outside, work-life balance. As one managing director put it: “We respect and support our bankers’ need for a harmonious and balanced work-family life.” In the words of another director: “Our systems ensure that people control themselves, sometimes without knowing it. We just feed back to people how well they are doing and we leave it at that.” So while focused on the internal life of the corporation, Michel also traces the importation of ideas from the outside world, ideas that shape and ultimately govern the inner workings.

Concerned as well with corporate internal processes is the article by Michael Prentice (“Managing Intertextuality: Display and Discipline across Documents at a Korean Firm”), who focuses on the authority of documents within a corporation. Prentice conducted fieldwork at a joint venture brand-consulting firm in South Korea, which aimed to fashion itself as “both a brand/marketing expert [to its Korean clients] and a capable, local manager” to its overseas partners. The focus of the company on branding and marketing may suggest that Prentice’s essay should be placed closer to the terminus of our continuum than its *origo*. However, Prentice is concerned not with the company’s product but rather with its processes—in particular, the semiotics of

document authority. Why and how do documents come to be viewed as authoritative?

Prentice observed two different modes by which semiotic components of various documents were utilized. The modes, which he labels “discipline” and “display,” both involve intertextuality and, often or even typically, the importation of signs from outside the company. Discipline involves the appropriation of features found in typical bureaucratic documents or even template documents themselves, such as a “Weekly Tasks and Working Hours Log.” The documents achieve authority at least in part owing to their status outside the company as the standard way of doing things. The documents get used inside the company to develop a systematic order, regulating “internal activities, such as deadlines, clock-in time, and task assignments.”

The display mode of utilizing documents, in contrast, involves the highlighting of connections between the document and the source on which it is based. Again, the source document comes typically from outside the company. For example, a “creative brief” from another prestigious company might be taken, modified, and used by the Korean company, with the source supplying authority for the internally produced document. As in the case of Wilf’s and Michel’s contributions, therefore, we see here a focus on the company’s importation of external representations. Those representations in turn shape the internal life of the company and also its products, namely, the documents it produces for other companies.

A less than satisfactory but still perhaps useful way to think about the outside-in to inside-out continuum is grammatical transitivity, looked at from the point of view of its semantic basis. The transitive subject is an “agent”—the doer in relation to the transitive verb—and the transitive object or indirect object a “patient”—the recipient of the action (Silverstein 1976; Dixon 1979). The portion of the continuum between the *origo* and dead center tends to concern the corporation as patient, the recipient of cultural elements (like Wilf’s innovation training, Michel’s Cartesian dualistic thinking and the work-life balance idea, and Prentice’s document templates downloaded from the internet). The actual *origo* of the continuum, not represented by any of the articles in this supplement issue, would focus on the act of creation of the corporation. In businesses registered as legal corporations in the United States and numerous other countries, creation involves a kind of performative act. After registering the business enterprise with a government agency, the government in effect dubs the business a “legal corporation,” establishing it as a bounded entity in the way a minister or judge might pronounce a couple legally mar-

ried. The dead center of the continuum would be a view of the corporation as simultaneously agent and patient, that is, a reflexive sentence in which the corporation is both the originator of the action and its recipient, as in the original intent of the Harley-Davidson video analyzed by Urban.

The part of the continuum between the dead center and terminus, correspondingly, would include studies that place the corporation in an agentive role, actively projecting its products and its brand outward into the world. The corporation is here conceived as doer, an entity capable of collective action (see Urban and Koh 2013). The farthest out on the continuum we go in this issue is the article by Agha, in which brand fractions emitted by the corporation, so to speak, mingle with other brand fractions, undergoing local semiotic uptake through brand formulations.

Two articles occupy the space between dead center and terminus, those by Anna Marie Trester and Kyung-Nan Koh, with the latter—"Representing Corporate Social Responsibility, Branding the Commodity as Gift, and Reconfiguring the Corporation as 'Super-'Person"—closest to the agentive terminus of the continuum. Koh's essay explores how a Hawaiian corporation used a community-based approach to urban design to redevelop an existing town in a "socially responsible" manner. In the development project she followed, the corporation calls upon existing local residents of Kula to participate in commodity design in the capacity of "authors," while the corporation itself assumes the "facilitator" role. Here we are reminded of the more patient-centric side of the continuum where culture is coming in from the outside, as in Prentice's importation of document templates off the internet; but, crucially, in Koh's essay the corporation as agent or doer comes luminously into focus. The decision to seek local input was a corporate decision, and Hawaiian Lands Company, Inc. (a pseudonym) plays the active role.

The corporation and the hired urban designers then used the linguistically expressed cultural ideologies and imaginaries of members of the local community to formulate specific graphic elements for town design. The design of the future town became a "chronotopic" (Bakhtin 1981) configuration, an imagined heteroglossic collectivity of the future. The design re-presented (i.e., made something present again and in a different modality) corporate-community relationships. Koh argues that in semiotically configuring the future town/commodity as symbolic representation of past and present corporate-community relationships, at an interactional level the corporation also manages to reconfigure itself as a social person (vs. a legal fiction). Like a natural person, it assumes agentive powers and effectively occupies the town community it is simultaneously planning and building. In this way, the corporation also makes

its case to the local population that it “has been, is, and will be here for the long term.”

Trester’s article, “Narrative Leadership: Storying Leaders in the Executive Business School Classroom,” falls closer to the dead center of our continuum. Her study involves the corporation projecting representations of itself into the world, but this time not so much through deliberate corporate agency. In this regard, Trester’s essay is similar to Urban’s, where the video escaped into the broader world, whereas Koh’s is closer to Agha’s. Using data gathered from a business school setting in the mid-Atlantic region of the eastern United States, Trester looks at how business managers in executive classrooms narrate their corporate experiences and, in doing so, at the same time narrate the corporations for which they work as well as their leadership roles within them.

Trester employs the methods of interactional sociolinguistics. In addition to looking at the narrations for representations of the corporation and the narrator’s leadership role, she examines the narrator’s (and narration’s) situation with respect to the interactional context of the executive education classroom, including intertextuality with other discourse. In this way, she demonstrates that “a small linguistic choice can facilitate the discursive introduction of corporations into the classroom.” In her article, the business organization takes shape as that which is occupied and managed by individuals with different statuses performing leadership roles. The stories represent the corporation “speaking” through its employees about itself, at least insofar as the stories derive from corporation-internal experience; but the employees are not talking to others in the corporation, as reflexive transitivity might suggest. Rather, they are talking to business school professors and fellow executives from other corporations.

Hence, the contributions in this issue are organized as follows: first, Wilf’s article, as closest to the *origo*, followed by Michel’s, Prentice’s, then Urban’s at the center, followed by Trester’s, Koh’s, and, last, Agha’s, as closest to the terminus. The two ends of the continuum we have described can, however, perhaps better be thought of as coming together to form a ring. After all, Wilf’s essay, which we placed close to the *origo* because it deals with corporations as the recipient of training, might with some tweaking be taken to shed light on the consulting company that does the training, with the training as the product they emit into the world. Similarly, Agha’s article at the terminus might be thought of as at the *origo*, since the corporation there, though emitter of brand fractions, effectively disappears behind the cloud of its emissions. It reemerges as constituted out of the external metasemiotic repre-

sentations (or “brand formulations,” to use Agha’s term) that circulate in the external world.

Urban and Koh (2013, 140) suggest that anthropologists have looked at corporations in two main ways: “from the inside, as if corporations were analogous to the small-scale societies anthropologists traditionally studied; and from the outside, as actors affecting and transforming the world.” They also propose a third way of studying the corporation, namely, as a cultural category—that is, viewing corporations as “also shaped by the culturally constituted meanings through which they are apprehended” (Urban and Koh 2013, 142). The semiotic approach to corporations we suggest in this supplement issue builds upon but also modifies this view. Corporations are not only “shaped by the meanings through which they are apprehended”; they also participate in a flow of signs in which they are both recipients, in the patient-centric way we suggest, and also senders, in the agent-centric way we have proposed as the terminus. Corporations can only in some measure be adequately conceived as tribe-like entities with distinctive cultures. They are that, to be sure, especially in the reflexive transitive mode in which they produce signs for their own internal consumption. As Louis Galambos, the eminent Johns Hopkins University business historian, and Jeffrey Sturchio, former Vice President for Corporate Social Responsibility at Merck, note (2014, 24):

Few who have not worked in or studied modern multinational corporations up close realize how insular they can be. Despite being global organizations that may operate in more than 100 countries, with tens of thousands of employees who interact daily with millions of customers and countless politicians, regulators, policy influentials, journalists, investors, advocates and community representatives, there is a strong cultural bias to look inward rather than outward. The main points of reference for most employees in corporations are their supervisors and fellow workers, the main concerns on a day-to-day basis the mundane tasks of meetings, presentations, memos and “deliverables.” To an extent surprising to those on the outside, the quotidian rhythms of corporate life are dominated by priorities, processes and practices that are too readily divorced from the world in which the corporation’s customers and communities live. If these tendencies operated without mediation, it would be hard to understand how most businesses could succeed at delivering products and services that their customers value enough to purchase.

However, corporations are not only insular tribes. They are also nodal points in the flow of representations from the outside in and from the inside out. Their semiotic construction as distinctive, bounded entities derives from their participation in this circulatory life. They are creations of a world in which signs are in constant motion. We hope this supplement issue on the semiotic corporation contributes to opening up the rich possibilities for semiotic research this approach suggests.

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