Rust belt or revitalization: competing narratives in entrepreneurial ecosystems

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Abstract
Purpose – Entrepreneurial ecosystems, the inter-connected set of organizing forces that produce and sustain regional entrepreneurial activity, are receiving heightened attention. This research finds that narratives about ecosystem participants discursively construct entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, the studies do not emphasize ecosystem and region-level narratives, focus on ecosystems in which narratives are uncontested and, thus, do not examine how ecosystem narratives compete with other regional narratives. The purpose of this paper is to develop a theory that explains how narratives and entrepreneurial ecosystems emerge and change in response to existing regional narratives.

Design/methodology/approach – A longitudinal process model is proposed to explain how entrepreneurial ecosystem narratives emerge and compete with other regional narratives. To illustrate the phases of the model, archival data were collected from three entrepreneurial ecosystems where new narratives have had to overcome entrenched economic and cultural narratives.

Findings – It is theorized that entrepreneurial ecosystems emerge, in part, through discourse. For an entrepreneurial ecosystem to develop, a narrative must take hold that allows participants to make sense of the new entrepreneurial activities and the changes to the region. A four-phase process model is presented to explain how entrepreneurial ecosystem narratives compete with other regional narratives and, particularly, negative economic narratives.

Originality/value – The theory developed in this paper contributes to the research on entrepreneurial ecosystems and organizational narratives and generates practical implications for policymakers and entrepreneurs seeking to promote entrepreneurship as a tool for economic development.

Keywords Economic development, Discourse, Narratives, New venture creation, Entrepreneurship and small business management, Entrepreneurial ecosystems, Regional entrepreneurship, Startup communities

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction
Narratives – linguistic devices used to make sense of actions, events and experiences (Brown, 1998) – play a central role in organizational phenomena (Dailey and Browning, 2014; Dalpiaz et al., 2014; Vaara et al., 2016; Vough and Caza, 2017). Entrepreneurship scholars examine narratives’ influence on the construction of entrepreneurial identities (Downing, 2005), entrepreneurs’ attempts to acquire investment (Martens et al., 2007) and the legitimacy of new ventures (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). A growing stream of research acknowledges the role of narratives in entrepreneurial ecosystems – the inter-related set of organizing forces that produce and sustain regional entrepreneurial activities (Audretsch and Belitski, 2017; Malecki, 2018; Roundy et al., 2018; Spigel, 2017). However, entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) scholars have not examined how narratives about EEs emerge and compete with existing regional narratives.
Studies of EEs tend to focus on established ecosystems, such as Silicon Valley (Kenney, 2000), Tel Aviv (Schäfer and Henn, 2018) and Taiwan (Klingler-Vidra et al., 2016) and on identifying the core attributes involved in the functioning of these ecosystems, such as the presence of venture capital, support organizations, entrepreneurial human capital and values that encourage entrepreneurship (Isenberg, 2010; Neck et al., 2004). The importance of the discursive characteristics of EEs are also acknowledged (Mack and Mayer, 2016; Mason and Brown, 2014) and are beginning to receive extended examination (Roundy, 2016).

For instance, Isenberg (2010) draws attention to entrepreneurs’ success stories (e.g. narratives about ventures going public, receiving large rounds of investment or being acquired by high-profile firms) as being key to inspiring individuals in the ecosystem to engage in entrepreneurship. Similarly, Roundy (2016) provides a theoretical analysis of the role of entrepreneurial narratives in shaping the sensemaking, identity construction, legitimacy and attention of EE participants and evaluators. Nevertheless, research on narratives in EEs is built on several implicit assumptions that have created important omissions in studies of EEs.

First, scholars focus primarily on narratives about entrepreneurs and ventures rather than EE-level narratives. That is, prior studies focus on the stories inside an EE, rather than the narratives about an EE. Second, research generally examines EEs that are mature rather than ecosystems that are nascent or in the early stages of the EE lifecycle (Mack and Mayer, 2016). The result of this focus is two-fold: the narratives of established ecosystems are generally fully developed and, relatedly, there tends to be one dominant narrative about the ecosystem (that a region is a “hotbed of entrepreneurial activity”; Tabaka, 2015). Thus, research tends to focus on ecosystems with uncontested and stable narratives. Although this research produces valuable insights about how ecosystems function, not all EEs have these characteristics, and, in fact, large and established EEs, like Silicon Valley, are much less prevalent than nascent ecosystems that are in an earlier stage of development (Mack and Mayer, 2016; Roundy, 2017a).

To address these omissions in prior research, this study pursues the following question: how do narratives about nascent entrepreneurial ecosystems emerge, take hold and compete with other regional narratives? To examine this question, archival data were collected from three cities that are attempting to create EEs but have had to overcome dominant narratives that conflict with the nascent EE. Insights from this data helped to generate a multi-phase, theoretical model explaining the temporal process by which EEs are discursively constructed. The main phases of the model are illustrated with examples from EE narratives. The proposed model and the theory that underpins it represent contributions to the entrepreneurship and organizational narratives literatures by clarifying the process by which EE narratives become established and drawing attention to how EE narratives must often compete with other powerful narratives.

**Literature review**

The theoretical roots of the entrepreneurial ecosystems literature are in studies of the environmental forces that shape entrepreneurship and in the view of entrepreneurial activities as socially embedded phenomena (Aldrich and Martinez, 2001; Jack and Anderson, 2002). Although individuals (and teams) create new ventures and engage in entrepreneurial activities, these actions depend on a complex, inter-related collection of forces – an ecosystem – of physical and socio-cultural attributes (Spigel, 2017). Furthermore, EE research has a geographic, spatially-oriented focus and acknowledges that innovative and entrepreneurial behaviors are not “spread uniformly over all regions” (Dieperink et al., 1988, p. 230).
EE research is generally based on single- or comparative-case studies of mature ecosystems (Cohen, 2006). Early studies focused on identifying the key characteristics and core attributes of successful EEs (Neck et al., 2004). More recent studies have begun to examine the emergence of EEs, the complex connections among EE components and how the connectedness of EE components influences ecosystem functioning (Motoyama and Knowlton, 2017; Roundy et al., 2018). Scholars are also beginning to explore EE-level outcomes, such as ecosystem resilience and to explain variance in EE vibrancy (Roundy et al., 2017).

Entrepreneurial ecosystem narratives
Research finds that, in addition to the material characteristics of an EE (e.g. technological and transportation infrastructure) and its social attributes (e.g. the networks connecting EE participants), an ecosystem’s cultural attributes also influence its functioning (Motoyama and Knowlton, 2017; Spigel, 2017). Cultural attributes are the values, norms and simple rules that are shared by EE participants and guide their behaviors and interactions (Roundy et al., 2018). These attributes include a tolerance for risk and business failure, the legitimacy of pursuing self-employment and the celebration of entrepreneurship (WEF, 2013). Academics and practitioners observe that simple rules, such as “give to the ecosystem before taking” and “help other ecosystem participants,” are critical for building cohesiveness among EE participants and a degree of coherence in their behaviors; such cohesiveness is necessary for EEs to exist and influences their resilience (Feld, 2012; Roundy, 2017a).

EE narratives are an important cultural attribute of ecosystems because they are a means by which other cultural elements are transmitted among participants. EE narratives also play other roles. Entrepreneurial success stories inspire prospective entrepreneurs. For instance, Mason and Brown (2014, p. 9) find that “the presence of a homegrown start-up that became a global force is a vital narrative in the community; it shows the possibilities of entrepreneurship and the potential rewards of leaving a stable job for the risks of starting your own company.” Isenberg (2010, p. 7) argues that entrepreneurial stories are one of the “pillars” of vibrant EEs and that they can “have a surprisingly stimulating effect on an entrepreneurial ecosystem – by igniting the imagination of the public and inspiring imitators”. Other studies emphasize the importance of events during which EE participants share stories of their entrepreneurial journeys and “war stories” from operating their ventures (Feld, 2012; Isenberg, 2016). When entrepreneurs communicate narratives about their experiences it serves an educational purpose by creating opportunities for vicarious learning (Konczal and Motoyama, 2013). Other studies focus on the role of entrepreneurial support organizations, such as incubators and accelerators, in providing opportunities for the transfer of stories among EE participants (Roundy, 2017b; Spigel, 2016). Furthermore, there is evidence that ecosystems without success stories and the means to transfer them under-perform (Mack and Mayer, 2016).

The reviewed studies and others (Nicotra et al., 2018; Theodoraki and Messeghem, 2017) indicate that scholars consistently acknowledge the function that narratives serve in EEs. However, these studies also reveal other recurrent foci in EE research, which represent blind spots in the EE literature. Most notably, although scholars acknowledge the importance of narratives, they have only focused on one type: entrepreneurs’ stories about their experiences and, most commonly, their successes. There are studies that hint at other types of narratives and at narrative functions other than allowing entrepreneurs to learn from the stories of others. For example, Motoyama and colleagues, in their study of the Chattanooga, TN, EE, find that “a specific success story” can “change the attitude and trajectory of entrepreneurship of a region” (Motoyama et al., 2016, p. 2; emphasis added). This finding suggests that stories can influence not just individual entrepreneurs but also the EE and the regional economy. In addition, in a
study of two Canadian ecosystems, Spigel (2017, p. 3) argues that the “discourses about cowboys and roughnecks [in the Calgary EE] have contributed to a local culture that focuses on wealth creation over other aspects of entrepreneurship such as building an advanced technology.” This finding also suggests that discourse can shape the functioning of an EE, not just entrepreneur- and venture-level activities.

Despite these hints in prior research about the multi-functional role of narratives in the development of EEs, studies have focused almost exclusively on large, mature EEs and on ecosystems with established successes. Thus, the process by which new EEs and the narratives describing them are constructed has not received attention. This represents an important oversight in the EE literature because regions are increasingly attempting to create EEs in locations that have long-suffered from negative economic conditions. For example, many regions that were formerly manufacturing powerhouses but that have struggled to adjust to post-industrialization and globalization forces are now seeking to stimulate entrepreneurship to revitalize their regional economies (Feld, 2017; Neumann, 2016). The creation of EEs in such areas, is accompanied by stories of entrepreneurship, innovation, technological advancement and prosperity (O’Connor et al., 2018; Siringi, 2011) – narratives that must often overcome a firmly-entrenched, counter-narrative rooted in the region’s recent history and focused on declining populations, lack of opportunities, closed factories and other negative economic events (Safford, 2009). Yet, it is not clear from prior research how EE narratives co-exist or overcome competing narratives. The methods described in the next section were used to address these omissions in our understanding of EE narratives.

Methods
Research design
An abductive research design was selected to complement the study’s guiding question (i.e. how do narratives of nascent entrepreneurial ecosystems emerge, take hold and compete with other regional narratives?). The abductive approach is contrasted with inductive and deductive research designs and focuses on finding a pattern in a phenomenon and suggesting a theory to explain the pattern (Yu, 1994, p. 15). An abductive design is also referred to as “theory matching” because of its emphasis on searching for a suitable theory to explain an empirical surprise or observation (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Kovács and Spens, 2005). The aim of the abductive approach is twofold: to explain a novel phenomenon and to generate new theory and insights (Kovács and Spens, 2005, p. 139).

As described in the previous section, there are important omissions in the literature examining entrepreneurial ecosystem narratives, which suggest that an exploratory approach, rather than a deductive, theory-testing design, was more appropriate. The partially-inductive approach is well-suited for studying phenomena that involve complex processes and that have multi-part temporal dynamics, social interactions, feedback loops and multiple levels of analysis; all of these characteristics make hypothesizing about how the processes work before observing them difficult (Fischer and Maggetti, 2017). Furthermore, the focus of this investigation is the process by which narratives emerge and influence EEs, rather than how much particular constructs matter (i.e. a variance-orientation; Langley, 1999; Huy, 2012). Abductive research is complementary to process studies (Langley et al., 2013).

The abductive approach was paired with the collection of archival, qualitative data. Archival data from the media and other sources are useful when the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and when numerous perspectives are necessary to tease apart the processes and dynamics at play (Rojas, 2010). Archival data were also collected because the flexibility, richness and granularity of qualitative data make it well-
suited for capturing discourse, including the narratives used to describe regions and entrepreneurial ecosystems. (Graebner et al., 2012).

Data collection
Three entrepreneurial ecosystems (Warren, Ohio; Youngstown, Ohio; and Chattanooga, Tennessee) were selected. The primary selection criterion was that the ecosystem was struggling to overcome (or had overcome) existing regional narratives. In all three ecosystems, archival data were collected from multiple sources, including articles from local and international news outlets, press releases from businesses, articles from magazines and trade journals, television news reports, websites of local businesses and other organizations, reports from economic development agencies and city documents related to planning, economic development and marketing. To collect data, archival databases (e.g. Lexis-Nexis, GeneralOneFile, US Newsstream) and manual internet searches were used. Dates of archival data spanned 1980 to 2018 with most from 2000 to present. Appendix summarizes the archival records that motivate the theory developed in the next section.

Theory development
Entrepreneurial ecosystems narratives: beyond “success” stories
There is a distinction between the narratives of individual participants in an EE (e.g. entrepreneurs’ success stories), which are conceptualized as “micro-level” EE narratives and “macro-level” narratives about the EE and the region in which it is located. The latter receive almost no attention despite the growing interest in macro-narratives in other fields (“narrative economics”; Shiller, 2017). Creating an EE, like enacting a major organizational change, requires the creation of a new narrative that explains to stakeholders what is happening in the region, how it is occurring and why someone should be involved (Sonenshein, 2010). In this way, entrepreneurial ecosystems emerge, in part, through communication (Taylor and Van Every, 2000) and are narrative constructions (Bruner, 1991; Dailey and Browning, 2014). Creating a coherent narrative is important for the construction of EEs because narratives “provide a means for individual, social and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving” (Vaara et al., 2016, p. 496), represent the way that social information is processed (Taylor and Van Every, 2000) and influence how stakeholders construe and interpret regional events and experiences (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997; Dalpiaz and Di Stefano, 2018; Weick, 1995).

Competing regional narratives
Developing an EE requires regional stakeholders to assemble the components of an ecosystem (Isenber, 2010) and for a new narrative to take root. According to the EE narrative, the path to improved regional economic prosperity is, in part, through entrepreneurship and the pursuit of opportunities to create new jobs, industries, technologies and innovations (Kundu and Rani, 2016; Stangler and Bell-Masterson, 2015). The outcomes of entrepreneurship, in turn, lead to revitalization for regions with struggling economies (O’Connor et al., 2018).

When an EE begins to coalesce, narratives about its existence become part of the regional discourse (Roundy, 2016). However, these new narratives are often at odds with prevailing regional narratives, which represent “competing attempts to make sense of events and their consequences” (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005, p. 859). In this way, competing regional narratives represent alternative interpretations of reality. For example, there are increasing attempts to stimulate entrepreneurial activity in regions dominated by so-called “Rust Belt” narratives (Austrian and Piazza, 2014). The “Rust Belt” is a label
originally applied to the formerly manufacturing-centric region of the USA comprised of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Indiana and neighboring states (High, 2003). This region experienced economic prosperity from the Industrial Revolution until the mid-1970s. However, globalization and shifts in the geography of manufacturing industries disrupted the region’s economy resulting in plant closures, massive layoffs and substantial decreases in standards of living (Kahn, 1999). Further, the stagnant regional economies and reduction in economic opportunities caused large segments of the population and particularly those with high levels of education, to migrate out of the Rust Belt (Mitra et al., 2008). Rust Belt cities eventually experienced high and persistent levels of unemployment, crime and urban decay and a reduced tax base to fund social services (Safford, 2009). The “Rust Belt” label has more recently been applied outside the USA, to regions in the UK, China, Russia and in other countries (Allen, 2017; Hospers, 2004).

The “Rust Belt” narrative emerged as residents and external evaluators (e.g. the media) attempted to make sense of the changing economy and to understand the associated economic and social conditions. According to this narrative, Rust Belt regions are “dying,” “hollowed out,” “wastelands” devoid of economic opportunity (Neumann, 2016; Sardar, 2010). The narrative contributes to and reflects negative psychological states including hopelessness, apathy and cynicism (Bowen et al., 2017). As residents internalized this narrative, an economic and psychological depression blanketed the region that influenced entrepreneurship and other business activities (Mitra and Frick, 2011). For instance, in Rust Belt regions there is often a pessimism toward new businesses, an assumption that they are destined to fail and a general lack of business confidence, all of which are not conducive to creating new ventures, attracting early-stage investment or establishing a stable customer base (Crane and Crane, 2007). Thus, negative economic narratives, like the Rust Belt narrative, reflect both objective circumstances and subjective assessments and through their influence on behaviors directly affect entrepreneurial activity.

The phases of entrepreneurial ecosystem narrative development
Entrepreneurial ecosystems and the discourse that describes them do not come into existence fully developed. Ecosystems and their narratives are constructed over time (Auerswald and Dani, 2017; Mack and Mayer, 2016). Furthermore, narrative construction is not a linear process (Downing, 2005). EE narratives change and evolve in response to their interplay with other regional narratives. In the sections that follow, a multi-phase, theoretical model is presented that seeks to explain how entrepreneurial ecosystems narratives emerge and compete with negative regional narratives and, particularly, the Rust Belt narrative. Table 1 summarizes the phases in the theoretical model and the main arguments motivating it.

The pre-entrepreneurial ecosystem narrative phase ($t_0$). In a region’s pre-entrepreneurial ecosystem narrative phase ($t_0$), before an EE narrative takes shape, there is not a concerted and coordinated effort by policymakers, support organizations and entrepreneurs to promote regional entrepreneurial activity. In this phase, an EE narrative does not exist because there is not a coherent EE about which stakeholders can communicate. The EE does not exist as a tangible or discursive object. In the pre-ecosystem phase, business creation is limited, there is no (or minimal) venture investment and minimal support services for entrepreneurs (Mack and Mayer, 2016). Entrepreneurial activities can occur during this phase; however, there is not an overarching narrative tying together the activities or providing a “plot” that clarifies how they are connected (Downing, 1997).
Because of the absence of entrepreneurship, regions in the pre-EE phase have dominant narratives focused on other types of economic activity. Regions with narratives based on negative economic and social conditions represent unfertile ground for entrepreneurial activities and for entrepreneurial narratives to take root. For example, there are regions with low levels of entrepreneurship because of “Rust Belt” economic conditions and narratives (High, 2003). As described, these narratives focus on events like plant closings and layoffs and themes such economic decline, “brain drain,” and lack of regional opportunities (Safford, 2009). In regions dominated by Rust Belt narratives, residents often lack optimism about the regional economy and its future, which negatively influences their beliefs about the viability of new businesses (Hobor, 2013). If entrepreneurship does occur, it is typically an isolated event, often necessity-based and not tied to a coordinated effort to spur entrepreneurial activity (Block et al., 2015).

The nascent entrepreneurial ecosystem narrative phase ($t_1$). If a region begins to exhibit a degree of coordination in its entrepreneurial activities, it can be said to enter the nascent EE phase ($t_1$). In this phase, there starts to be coordinated and co-occurring efforts to spur entrepreneurship, for instance through the creation of incubators, small business development centers, local government programs or entrepreneurship meetups (Konczal and Motoyama, 2013) – activities which suggest that there is now some “local buzz” about entrepreneurship (Bathelt et al., 2004) and a budding movement focused on stimulating entrepreneurial activities.

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<tr>
<th>Status of EE and other regional narratives</th>
<th>Characteristics of phase</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-entrepreneurial ecosystem narrative phase ($t_0$)</td>
<td>EE narratives do not exist. Other regional narratives dominate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nascent EE narrative phase ($t_1$)</td>
<td>Narratives emerge focusing on the entrepreneurial activities of ecosystem participants but not the ecosystem. Other regional narratives continue to dominate</td>
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<td>Competing narratives phase ($t_2$)</td>
<td>EE narratives emerge. Other regional narratives compete for dominance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominant EE narrative phase ($t_3$)</td>
<td>EE narrative is dominant. Other regional narratives fade</td>
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The emergence of entrepreneurship-focused narratives is an influence on the attempts to spur entrepreneurship and an outcome of these activities. At the nascent phase of EE development, however, the narratives pertain to individuals, rather than the EE as a whole, because there is not a highly coordinated ecosystem at work. The entrepreneurial narratives that are communicated among stakeholders in the region and by the media are focused on isolated, micro-narratives of individual ventures’ successes and failures. The micro-narratives of entrepreneurship and particularly success stories and venture fundings, receive attention, in part, because of their novelty and because they cut against the dominant regional narratives, which emphasize business failures and lack of regional economic opportunities. While other narratives, such as the Rust Belt narrative, dominate, connections may exist between the dominant narrative and the micro-narratives of entrepreneurship. At this phase, however, the discourse about entrepreneurship and the nascent EE is as disjointed and uncoordinated as the entrepreneurial activity itself.

An example of a regional economy that is in the nascent EE phase is Warren, OH. Warren is a city with approximately 42,000 residents in Northeast Ohio, midway between Cleveland, OH and Pittsburgh, PA (Archival record (A) 9). Beginning in the late-1970s, the city suffered economic declines as the industries on which its economy was built, including steel, automobiles, and other types of heavy manufacturing, relocated or began to struggle. In the past two decades, a Rust Belt narrative focused on unemployment, crime, population loss, and decaying infrastructure came to dominate the discourse about the city (A10; A13). Media stories and other narratives about the city rarely contained descriptions of entrepreneurial activities and instead focused on negative economic events and conditions (e.g. A1). Within the past five years, however, entrepreneurial activities have increased in intensity, and the narratives describing these activities are more prevalent (e.g. A2; A5). For instance, loosely connected support organizations have been created to spur and support entrepreneurial activities (A3; A4; A6) and the media now features stories about the creation of new businesses (A7; A8). In these narratives, however, entrepreneurship is portrayed as a novelty and as occurring in spite of the city’s Rust Belt conditions (e.g. A2).

In Warren, there is not (yet) a coherent narrative about the city- or ecosystem-level efforts to spur entrepreneurship because entrepreneurial activities are happening, in many cases, in isolation of one another. That is, individual entrepreneurial activities, such as the creation of new businesses, are not tied to a collective ecosystem of forces working to generate and sustain entrepreneurial activity – i.e. a coordinated entrepreneurial ecosystem. As a result, micro-level entrepreneurial narratives are not tied to an EE narrative but instead are sometimes tied to the Rust Belt narrative and involve stories about how entrepreneurs in Warren are creating businesses despite the Rust Belt conditions, because of the conditions or in hopes of alleviating the conditions (A2; A8). Although the narratives in this phase are not linked to an EE narrative and remain largely unconnected, they are influential because they highlight that engaging in entrepreneurship is a viable option. In this way, individual narratives serve as evidence that entrepreneurship can – and is – occurring in Warren. However, the Rust Belt narrative remains the dominant – although possibly weakening – narrative of the city.

The competing narratives phase (t₂). If a region’s level of entrepreneurial activity continues to increase, a positive feedback loop (or “virtuous” cycle) can be created whereby the more entrepreneurs that emerge, the more entrepreneurial narratives are created, which in turn inspires more entrepreneurship and more narratives (Roundy et al., 2017). Also, once there is a critical mass of stories about individual entrepreneurs, the media may begin to produce stories that draw attention to the entrepreneurship that is occurring, to create connections among seemingly isolated entrepreneurial activities and, thus, to lay the groundwork for a regional entrepreneurship narrative to develop. The construction of such
stories is a sensemaking activity that encourages both “authors” and audiences of narratives to identify the connections among entrepreneurial activities and to create explanations for why entrepreneurship has increased in the region (Abolafia, 2010).

If the region’s level of entrepreneurship continues to grow, eventually a narrative will emerge focused not just on individual entrepreneurs and ventures but on the region’s entrepreneurial activities as a budding ecosystem. In this phase, an EE begins to develop since there is now a diversity of entrepreneurial activities (ventures being founded, early-stage investment, support organizations) and some coherence among these activities (Roundy et al., 2018). The latter represents the formation of an inter-connected startup community in which the participants share a degree of common values, intentions, goals, and behaviors (Feld, 2012).

A narrative describing the EE, which both reflects and contributes to its growth, will begin to be communicated among EE participants by external evaluators of the region and by the media. These narratives can focus on how there is now a significant entrepreneurship movement in the region and the phrase “entrepreneurial ecosystem” may even be used to describe the inter-related set of forces influencing entrepreneurial activities. Unlike in the nascent EE phase (t₁), when the stories about entrepreneurship are isolated and represent disjointed events and when the primary narrative in the region is a negative one, in the competing narratives phase (t₂), there are (at least) two narratives vying for attention: a narrative focused on the nascent EE and a narrative focused on the negative economic conditions of the region.

The increasingly coherent EE narrative, which is focused on the region’s growing entrepreneurial activities, their positive outcomes, and on the optimistic future trajectory of the EE, will be at odds with the once-dominant negative economic narrative, which is rooted in past economic failures and their continued negative effects. The competition between EE narratives and negative economic narratives represents a critical juncture in the formation and success of a nascent EE because unless the EE narrative gains traction and is internalized by at least a subset of regional residents, the EE’s growth is unlikely to progress because investments of time and other resources will not be made in the ecosystem.

As the regional narratives compete for attention and dominance, stakeholders who have internalized the negative narrative may exhibit skepticism or disbelief toward the EE narrative. Stakeholders may view the EE narrative as more “story” than reality; such claims question the believability and credibility of the narrative (Barry and Elmes, 1997). This interplay between the two narratives may also play out in media accounts as the media feature stories about an EE simply because they run counter to the once-dominant negative narrative. In this phase, EE narratives are likely perceived as novel, interesting or attention-grabbing by audiences. Ultimately, however, EE growth cannot be based strictly on the production of narratives. Narratives must be tied to tangible results from EE activity, such as the creation of new businesses, revitalized neighborhoods surrounding business districts or an influx of new residents, human capital, and investment. EE growth also requires investments in physical, technological, and social infrastructure (Spigel, 2017).

An example of a region in the competing narratives phase of EE development is Youngstown, OH. Like Warren, Youngstown is located in the northeast corner of Ohio. Youngstown was a manufacturing powerhouse focused on steel production and ancillary industries until the late 1970s when a series of plant closings and relocations sent the city into a downward economic and social spiral (A14; A15; A16). Over the course of the next three decades, Youngstown became synonymous with the “Rust Belt,” and, in fact, the city was often used in national and international media stories as the quintessential example of the Rust Belt phenomenon (e.g. A19; A20; A21). Like the city of Warren, Youngstown’s
negative Rust Belt narrative focuses on the mill closings, lack of economic opportunities, decreased standard of living, blight, pollution, and crime that came to plague the city (A22; A23; A25; A26). Youngstown’s economic conditions became so bleak that the city lost 60 percent of its population and gained the moniker, “the incredible shrinking city” (A15; A27).

After the worst of the region’s economic struggles, in the mid-2000s, Youngstown progressed from the pre-EE phase (t0), when the dominant narrative of the region was the negative, Rust Belt economic narrative and there were minimal entrepreneurial activities, to the nascent EE phase (t1), where entrepreneurial activity began to occur with greater frequency. Entrepreneurial activity was initially isolated and not the result of coordinated regional efforts. It was spurred by forces such as the low costs to found and operate new businesses in the city and a reverse-Rust Belt-diaspora (A28; A29; Harrison, 2017), which involves individuals with ties to Rust Belt cities returning to them to pursue their revitalization.

In the past decade, Youngstown entered the competing narratives phase (t2). Media stories and other city discourse now reflect not only a higher level of entrepreneurial activities (e.g., new restaurants, hotels, condos, and high-growth ventures) but also a more coordinated community surrounds these activities comprised of support organization (e.g., incubators), events, investment funds, and government programs (e.g., A31; A32; A33). Thus, a clear entrepreneurial ecosystem has developed to encourage and sustain entrepreneurship in the region (A34; A35).

Narratives about Youngstown increasingly focus on the city’s entrepreneurial ecosystem (A37; A39). Initially, the Rust Belt narrative dominated city narratives and entrepreneurial activity was featured as a novelty (e.g., A40). Recently, however, stories about the city focus on the EE narrative as an alternative to the Rust Belt narrative. There are stakeholders who exhibit skepticism toward the new narrative and who continue to assert the Rust Belt narrative (e.g., A33). However, there are also groups of stakeholders who act as champions of the new EE narrative (A34; A38). Thus, the region is experiencing a period of narrative contestation. As the EE narrative gains traction, there is starting to be evidence that it may usurp the Rust Belt narrative as the dominant regional narrative (A35; A36). If this occurs, the region will enter the terminal phase of entrepreneurial ecosystem and EE narrative development.

The dominant entrepreneurial ecosystem narrative phase (t3). If entrepreneurial activities continue to increase and are consistently the subject of stakeholders’ discourse, a point is reached where the EE narrative gains so much traction and entrepreneurial activity occurs with such frequency that the EE narrative usurps the negative economic narrative as the dominant regional narrative. When this occurs, the EE narrative has become the primary lens through which stakeholders make sense of regional events and experiences. During this phase, there are increases in both the diversity of entrepreneurial activities and the coherence of EE participants’ values, intentions, and behaviors (Roundy et al., 2018). The result is a vibrant and connected startup community. The region’s negative economic narrative may still be present in this phase, but it is now a “low light” in stories about the region and, thus, no longer the dominant discourse.

Chattanooga, TN, is an example of a city that recently entered the dominant EE narrative phase (t3). In its early history, the city’s economy focused on an extensive rail system and its proximity to the Tennessee River (A41). During the early- to mid-1900s, the Chattanooga economy shifted to iron foundries, machine works, and textiles. However, in the late 1970s, deindustrialization and migration from the urban core led to significant economic and population declines (A41; A43). Adding to these issues was an event with objective and symbolic ramifications: in 1969, Chattanooga was named the “dirtiest city in America” by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) because of the extensive pollution produced in the city during industrialization (A49). The “dirtiest city” designation and the subsequent
community fallout created a low point for the city and served notice to leaders that drastic economic, social, and environmental changes were needed. During subsequent decades, city leaders, entrepreneurs, and support agents made investments in the city’s business community, technological infrastructure, and natural environment, which have produced a vibrant EE (Motoyama et al., 2016). In recent media stories and other modes of discourse, the EE narrative has all but replaced the city’s negative economic narrative (e.g. A47; A48). When the negative narrative is still communicated, it is often used as a point of reference to the past (e.g. “it’s hard to believe that the ‘dirtiest city’ is now...”) or to make the achievements of the EE more pronounced and impressive (A44; A45; A46). Thus, the new narrative, which focuses on entrepreneurship and on Chattanooga as the “Gig City” (a reference to the city’s gigabyte internet infrastructure, one of the fastest in the USA) is now the primary narrative through which the city is evaluated and events are understood (A49; A50).

To summarize, regions seeking to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem often must overcome existing regional narratives that are contrary to entrepreneurial discourse. If regions are characterized by these negative economic narratives, they progress through four phases of discourse in the development of an EE. As they pass through these phases, the dominant narrative in the region becomes contested by the EE narrative. If the champions of entrepreneurial activity are successful, the EE narrative gains traction and eventually becomes a dominant regional narrative.

Discussion
Entrepreneurial ecosystems are receiving intense scholarly and practitioner interest. However, there has been little theorizing about the discourse used to describe and make sense of EEs. This paper argues that insights are generated by focusing on the narratives about entrepreneurial ecosystems and how they interact with, and potentially must overcome, other regional narratives. The proposed theory contributes to entrepreneurial ecosystems and organizational narratives literatures.

Contributions to theory
Entrepreneurial ecosystems. The theory presented in this paper draws attention to several key omissions in EE research, which deepen our understanding of the phenomenon. First, by focusing on the process by which emerging EE narratives must overcome existing regional narratives, the theorizing calls attention to the study of entrepreneurial ecosystems (and EE narratives) that are not fully developed. Prior research focuses almost exclusively on EEs that are established and, in most cases, located in large, resource-rich cities. However, research is slow to examine nascent, emerging, and smaller ecosystems. By ignoring such ecosystems, and the cities and regions in which they exist, it is not clear if the findings from EE research are applicable to younger and unestablished ecosystems. For instance, as this paper theorizes, there is a critical difference between established and emergent ecosystems: in nascent EEs the discourse surrounding the ecosystem has not yet “settled” and there is more than one narrative.

The temporal and process-based focus of the proposed theory aligns with research calling for scholars to take a lifecycle approach to studying entrepreneurial ecosystems (Mack and Mayer, 2016). Static, cross-sectional studies that only capture EE functioning at one point in time (usually at the established stage) miss the processes involved in the construction and development of an EE. This study also draws attention to the multi-functional role of narratives in EEs. Prior research focuses on just one type of EE narrative: stories about individual entrepreneurial successes. However, the theory developed in this paper points to the importance of EE scholars also considering the role of system-level narratives.
Organizational narratives. The “narrative-turn” in management and entrepreneurship (Fenton and Langley, 2011) has brought renewed interest in the role of narratives in organizational cognition, behaviors, and outcomes. However, narratives research has not explored how narratives influence meta-organizations, like entrepreneurial ecosystems, which represent a unique supra-organizational phenomenon (Gulati et al., 2012). Meta-organizations are networks of individuals and organizations not bound by employment relationships but united by collective, system-level goals (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2008). In the case of entrepreneurial ecosystems, shared goals revolve around stimulating regional entrepreneurial activity. The theory presented in this paper suggests that shared EE narratives are a means by which individuals and organizations become bound together as a collective.

Although organizational narratives research explores competing narratives, it does not do so at the level of the meta-organization (or ecosystem). Instead, research generally takes an intra-organizational focus and explores how narratives compete during internal organizational changes (Sonenshein, 2010; Vaara et al., 2016). As the theory and examples provided suggest, there are unique dynamics involved when inter-organizational, ecosystem-level narratives compete for attention and dominance. For example, at the EE-level, for a narrative to gain traction requires a complex constellation of stakeholders (including entrepreneurs, investors, regional residents, and the media) to internalize the narrative. These stakeholders cross functional, organizational, and even geographic boundaries.

Implications for practitioners
The theory presented has implications for regional policymakers who are trying to stimulate EE development. First, the theory suggests that when practitioners attempt to create an EE, the dominant narrative in the region is an obstacle that may need to be overcome. The dominant narrative may be particularly troublesome if the region has experienced negative economic events, such as Rust Belt conditions, which are counter to entrepreneurial efforts. In such regions, practitioners should be cognizant of existing regional narratives and the narrative-competition they are likely to encounter and should have a strategy for influencing regional narratives. This implication supports the important role of ecosystem “champions” identified in other studies of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Feldman, 2014). The champions of an emerging EE should make active attempts to promote and shape the EE narrative.

The theory proposed suggests that narrative-related activities may be as critical as other, more commonly examined, activities such as the creation of incubators. In addition, practitioners should be aware of how the media promotes (or weakens) regional narratives. Although narratives are produced and transmitted through the daily, discursive interactions of regional residents, the media play a unique role in aggregating, legitimizing, and communicating EE narratives (Zavyalova et al., 2017).

Directions for future research
The most urgent direction for future research is to further test the empirical validity of the proposed theoretical model. Although archival data from three entrepreneurial ecosystems motivates the theory, a more formal test of the theoretical model is necessary. Most studies of EEs use case study methodology and are based on qualitative data. The advantage of qualitative data is that it is well-suited for studying the establishment of EE narratives and their competition with other regional narratives. Specifically, through interviews, ethnographic observation, and archival records (e.g. media stories), the narratives of EE participants and their attempts to make sense of regional narratives can be collected (Graebner et al., 2012).

The process by which narratives are constructed, grow in influence, and come to replace other narratives is complex and unfolds over time. Although the theoretical model is presented
as linear, in reality, the process of EE narrative construction and competition is likely iterative and recursive. Qualitative data and methods possess the flexibility to capture the nuances of such phenomena. However, despite the advantages of qualitative data, quantitative analysis of EE narratives may also prove fruitful. Specifically, media narratives and other documents (e.g. strategic plans of local governments) can be used to construct a corpus of text about a regional EE. Using computer-aided text analysis or hand-coded content analysis (Saldaña, 2015; Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010), properties of EE narratives could be explored, such as the vividness, interestingness or concreteness of stories about an EE. How these text-level properties might change as narratives evolve could also be examined.

The focus of this paper’s theorizing was to construct a process-based account of how EE narratives are constructed and gain prominence. The critical insights about EE functioning and performance could also be uncovered by taking a variance approach. For example, a variance-oriented research design could be used to address questions such as, “do EEs with dominant narratives outperform EEs in which narratives are still contested?” or “are EEs with coherent narratives more (or less) resilient than EEs with less coherent or highly contested narratives?” Regarding the latter question, it may be interesting to explore if there are actually advantages to having multiple narratives in an EE. Perhaps an EE that has not settled on a single narrative to describe the ecosystem is more resilient to changes in environmental conditions. For example, an EE narrative that is too narrow (e.g. a narrative focused on developing an ecosystem around a specific technology) might cause an EE to become “locked-in” to a specific trajectory. If there is a significant change in the EE’s environment, such as a shift in demand away from the targeted technology or industry, then an EE with a narrow narrative may have difficulty constructing a new narrative that allows it to pursue other opportunities. Further work is needed to examine the linkages between characteristics of EE narratives and ecosystem-performance.

This study expands EE research from a focus on the individual narratives in ecosystems to the narratives about EEs and the regions in which they are located. However, EEs are also likely influenced by the broader macroeconomic narratives that dominate national, and even international, discourse. This suggests that research is needed on the effects of macroeconomic forces on EEs and the influence of the narratives that surround these forces. A promising stream of research that could serve as the basis for future studies is Nobel Laureate Robert Shiller’s work on “narrative economics” (Shiller, 2017). In the 2017 Presidential address to the American Economic Association (later reprinted in Shiller, 2017), Shiller called attention to the possibility that economic conditions, and particularly fluctuations in the macroeconomy, are caused not only by economic behaviors but also by “the prevalence and vividness of certain stories”. Shiller defines narrative economics as “the study of the spread and dynamics of popular narratives, the stories, particularly those of human interest and emotion, and how these change through time, to understand economic fluctuations”. He demonstrates how analysis of popular narratives sheds light on major economic events, such as the Depression of 1920-21, the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Great Recession of 2007-2009. Future research could examine the impact of macroeconomic narratives on a region’s ability to create and support a vibrant EE.

Finally, studies of the discursive construction of EEs could address other open questions. For instance, how long does it typically take for a region to progress through the phases of EE narrative construction? In the examples provided, the three EEs progressed through the main phases of the model in the time span of a decade; however, more work is needed to examine the amount of time typically spent at each phase. In addition, the theorizing in this paper focused on one negative counter-narrative (the Rust Belt narrative); but more research
is needed to explore if there are other important regional narratives that may work to augment or hinder EE narratives.

**Concluding remarks**

Promoting entrepreneurship is viewed as a mechanism for jumpstarting sluggish regional economies, rejuvenating fractured and struggling communities, freeing individuals from the status quo and bringing about innovative and value-producing social, institutional and cultural conditions (Halkias et al., 2011; Rindova et al., 2009). Building and strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems are actions that increase entrepreneurship in a region and can generate the positive outcomes associated with productive entrepreneurial activities (O’Connor et al., 2018). However, creating entrepreneurial ecosystems involves both tangible investments (e.g. attracting financial capital, strengthening technological infrastructure, creating support organizations) and discourse. The theory developed in this paper draws attention to a particularly influential form of discourse – narratives – in the construction of entrepreneurial ecosystems and opens new avenues for scholars to explore how ecosystems are constructed, gain prominence and recast regional economies.

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**Further reading**


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