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The corporate making of history: History communication of organizations as research subject

Publicly funded museums, history books and scholarly-led archives are considered to be the legitimate wardens of history. However, private and commercially oriented corporations, too, can influence people's perception of history as well. Infamous – and extreme – cases, such as Volkswagen's deception related to crimes during the National Socialist era in Germany (Röpke & Steinhoff, 1999), demonstrate how interwoven corporations are with politics, culture, history, and the public perception of "facts". Similar discussions and critiques have emerged when it comes to other German organizations' portrayal of their actions and roles from 1933 to 1945 (Fleiter, 2007; Grieger, 2019). This portrayal includes commercial corporations making use of forced labour, such as BMW, Bahlsen and Dr. Oetker, as well as public organizations who not only followed orders, but actively contributed to atrocities. Other examples, contingent on national history, can be identified across Europe. In a Danish context, a much-discussed theme in Danish political and organizational history writing is the collaboration politics during the German occupation of Denmark 1940 to 1945, including Danish business' collaboration with the occupational forces in establishing the Atlantic Wall (Lueg & Johansen, 2021; Lauridsen, 2002). In the aftermath of the war years and up until the present, corporations and other organizations had to develop strategies for dealing with their past.

Today, though they somewhat lag behind other e.g. Asian traditions (for a Japanese case s. Matsuzaki, 2015), European corporations regularly engage in history-making: they connect to national history in order to position themselves as co-founders of national prosperity and development (Danskebank, 2022; Carlsberg, 2022), or publish stories to describe their development from small enterprises to larger businesses (Danfoss, 2022; Salling, 2022; ConservasPinhais, 2022; CiuCiu, 2022). Common are "founder stories" (particularly strong in established, large companies, e.g. Danfoss' Mads Clausen story, but also present in younger companies, s. Lakridsbybüløw, 2022). There is also a prominence of stakeholder interest in how organizations position themselves vis-à-vis their own or a connected, national past with a view to racism and colonialism: Examples of stakeholder interest in how corporations connect to the past include the debates around Haribo's 2014 decision to redesign a licorice-piece showing an over-stylized black face (Okstrøm, 2014), or the debate around the Danish coffee brand Cirkelkaffe's brand icon which uses the imagery of an African woman (Scherrebeck, 2015).

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From here, we define “organizational history communication” as “collective strategic communication which entails a) an organization’s direct (or own) history or b) history with an indirect impact on the organization” (Lueg & Johansen, 2021). This definition includes both material elements related to local, national and cross-national history and cultural heritage (such as architecture, buildings, and places) and immaterial elements (such as norms, values, and ideas that are connected to history and cultural heritage) (Vecco, 2010). In writing corporate histories and communicating strategically about the past, business professionals perform tasks situated between branding, strategic (sales) communication, and historical reporting. The dangers of this lie in a “commodification” (Polanyi, 2001) of historical work, where reputation management outweighs historical accuracy. By contrast, as an ideal scenario, organizational history communication (OHC) can be beneficial for transparency and citizen engagement. Corporations can support the public by keeping local, national and cross-national economic and social history alive. They can create a memory culture for citizens by cooperating with public archives, or by funding publicly accessible artefacts. We therefore suggest to explore organizational history communication as an empirical research subject, to identify existing characteristics and patterns of OHC, and to critically evaluate this practice.

State of the art

Scholarly research has so far just begun to respond to the historical turn in corporate communication. Scholars have investigated organizational history (McLaren, 2015; Mills and Novicevic, 2019), employing numerous related terms: “corporate history” (Booth et al., 2007); “corporate heritage” (Balmer & Burghausen, 2015a); “rhetorical history” (Godfrey et al., 2016); and “historic corporate social responsibility” (Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2016). Within the field, emphasis has previously been placed on conceptual work which mainly attempts to clarify these diverse terms (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004; Godfrey et al., 2016).

Within organizational history research, a particular strand, i.e. rhetorical history, addresses the strategic use of organizational past in internal and external communication (Foster et al., 2017; Suddaby et al., 2010). An organization’s history is seen less as an objective fact and more as a malleable resource – i.e. a social and rhetorical construction – that can be used for strategic purposes. Suddaby et al. (2010) suggest that history is viewed as rhetorical or discursive device that can be manipulated, reconstructed, and edited. Rhetorical history, thus, is connected to the idea of selective memory as equally comprising remembering and forgetting particular aspects of an organization’s past. In particular, organizational forgetting is linked to deliberate omission of aspects or to attempts to neutralize potentially contradictory aspects (Anteby & Molnár, 2012). It is said to reflect how companies strategically can “mediate between their material and symbolic environments” (Suddaby et al., 2010: 157). The communicative use of history by organizations are said

to lead to four different strategic objectives or goals (Foster et al., 2017): to build organizational identity by highlighting distinctive, constitutive features; to create culture by reproducing and promoting desired behaviours; to ensure legitimacy by linking the organization to industry and society norms and expectations; and to generate authenticity by demonstrating the uniqueness of the organization compared to other organizations within the same field.

The strategic communicative use of organizational past (Foster et al., 2017; Suddaby et al., 2010) has been criticised, e.g. by emphasizing the deliberate omission of potentially conflict-laden history (Anteby & Molnár, 2012). Though such work provides inspiration for the conceptual-critical part of our research, existing empirical work within organizational history research mostly comprises single case studies (Aeon & Lamertz, 2021; Bieri, 2014; Foster et al., 2011; Barnes & Newton, 2018). Case studies (often: false reporting of history) focus on; e.g., Volkswagen and IBM (Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2016); Bertelsmann (Booth et al., 2007), and Swedish multinational companies (Brunninge, 2009). A consolidation of empirical insights and theory to create a pathway to potential best practices is lagging.

Organizational history communication between disciplines

Organizational history communication (OHC) can be approached as a multi-disciplinary area suspended between research on organizational identity, branding and marketing (for an overview, s. Balmer & Burghausen, 2015b) as well as discourse studies (storytelling and narrative studies), and, obviously, historical studies. Whereas research in organizational identity and identification mainly addresses the organization's members or employees' feeling of belonging and motivation, the focus of marketing and branding research is to approach cultural heritage and history as managerial tools that can be used to maintain and improve the organization's reputation among external stakeholders (cf. e.g. Foster et al., 2017). OHC cuts across this internal-external divide in order to place emphasis on the collective strategic communication related to an organization's direct and indirect history. Organizational history and heritage are seen in light of an organization's current practice when it comes to dealing with the past. OHC refers to the formal handling, mediation and/or discussion of the relationships between the organization's direct and indirect past and present – and thus it includes both the inclusion and exclusion of history in strategic communication. Since OHC is representative of social power asymmetries between organizations, between organizations and their stakeholders, and between social groups organizations relate to, it is also a research subject for any discipline interested in social practice and power, i.e. Foucauldian discourse studies (Walkerline, 2017). As OHC, in practice, makes use of storytelling (e.g., chronology and plot), it is also related to critical research within narrative traditions, i.e. to the exploration of how stories are used and mediated in society through dominant and counter narratives. Societal values,

political regimes, and cultural changes – along with their internal dynamics – influence those aspects and elements of an organization’s direct and indirect history, which the organization and its stakeholders perceive as relevant and legitimate (Lueg et al., 2021b). Conflicts related to which stories could and should be told arise for instance when stakeholders experience that certain organizations overlook or take advantage of the cultural identity and belonging of the stakeholders, i.e. practice cultural appropriation (Young, 2010). To name one example, Disney has been subject to manifold discussions of inaccurate and damaging storytelling. Its famous “Pocahontas” movie, arguably, embodies the ideal-typical dynamics between a powerful hegemonic narrative (Lueg et al., 2021a; Lueg, 2020) a marginalized counter-narrative (Lueg et al., 2021b): whilst Disney portrays a dynamic young female Pocahontas that falls in love with a colonist, native American voices have long tried to set the picture of the real Pocahontas (named: Amonute) right as a child abducted and exploited by colonists (Townsend, 2005). Such powerful stories, initiated by corporations, matter as they durably impact how the public views cultural communities and perceives of history. At other times, conflicts are triggered by historians correcting or challenging the factual elements of the stories told. Moreover, society and stakeholders may change their perception of the role and responsibility of organizations in relation to acknowledging and representing the past. This suggests that a reciprocal relationship exists between how organizations approach, and communicate about, history, on the one hand, and how stakeholders and society view history, on the other. Thus, OHC is suspended between history studies, and research on organizations, social practice and discourse.

Towards a research agenda

Though organizational history has been explored under various terms, we still find consolidation of empirical and theoretical insights lagging. In the face of the increasing practical use – and sometimes appropriation – of history and heritage in strategic corporate communication, we find it necessary to explore the phenomenon from a communicative angle, within the framework of organization studies. As European organizations, though increasingly responding to the executive trend of applied history communication, are somewhat late starters, we suggest a mapping of European organizational practices, first. This is, in order to identify characteristics and to map patterns of organizational uses of the past. Second, these existing practices can be critically evaluated against the backdrop of theories focussing on discourse, power and organizational behaviour. This will allow for a discussion of how strategic goals of organizations (e.g. motivation internally, and reputation externally) can be balanced with organizations’ societal and cultural obligations to represent local, national and cross-national history and cultural heritage.

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