REVIEWING THE ROLE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION DISCOURSE IN
IDENTITY FORMATION

- Conclusions from the Intech case -

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INTRODUCTION

‘To make sure that organizational members identify with the organization’ (Cheney, Christensen et al. 2004: 128) is taken as a given concept of corporate identity in prevailing orthodox corporate communication theories – and regularly communication managers are asked to support this task by ensuring consistency in the visual and thematic positioning of the company. This also happened when Intech\(^1\), a major multinational conglomerate based in Germany, started to launch its Intech management system.

This paper challenges the orthodox view by drawing on discourse theories (e.g. Barry and Elmes 1997; Hardy, Palmer et al. 2000) in order to better understand how managed forms of communication unfolded their performative capacity (Feldman 2000) in practice. Specifically, the significance of (substantive) business concept and (symbolic) identity-related communication as reciprocal processes in identity formation was explained. Moreover, the research project helped to explain identification as an ongoing negotiation process leading to diverse affectual ambiguities (Iedema, Rhodes et al. 2005) amongst company members.

This was achieved by following an ethnographic case study approach, analysing communication discourse at Intech. Data was collected over a period of 15 months, structured and thematic analysis conducted, supported by ATLAS.ti computer-aided qualitative data analysis software. Methods of discourse analysis were applied in order to explain concrete practices.

\(^1\) The term ‘Innovation Technology’ (abbreviated ‘Intech’) is a pseudonym. The decision to use a pseudonym was made by the researcher to ensure confidentiality with regards to all company-related information displayed in this paper.
A key contribution is to provide an in-depth review of the role of corporate communication discourse in identity formation. Rather than acting as an instrument to transport consistent visuals and messaging, corporate communication discourse is explained as a mode of active participation in affectualized work. In this, corporate communication discourse can potentially balance symbols and substance as two sides of the same coin – the company’s overall purpose. Careful attention needs to be given the to the negotiation process, the success of which is directly linked to the quality of communication it is based on (Stacey 2003).
PREVAILING CONCEPTS OF CORPORATE IDENTITY

In orthodox corporate communication, the concept of corporate identity is primarily used to explain a straightforward way for transporting the company’s purpose to audiences. A recent review of these theories (Huebner 2007) has shown that a positivist tradition dominates corporate identity research, leading a strongly functional view.

Argenti (2003) provides one such example by defining the concept of identity as ‘the visual manifestation of the company’s reality as conveyed through the organization’s name, logo, motto, products, services, buildings, stationery, uniforms, and all other tangible pieces of evidence created by the organization and communicated to a variety of constituencies.’ This visual identity conveys an image of the company which the target groups hold – but which is constructed by internal constituencies, i.e. the company itself.

More generally, the notion of identity was traditionally defined as the ‘central, distinct and enduring’ dimensions of a company (Albert and Whetten 1985). The orthodox concept of corporate identity typically refers to something that sets an organisation apart from its surroundings (van Riel 1992), suggesting ‘that by strengthening the organization’s identity – its experienced distinctiveness, consistency and stability – it can be assumed that individuals’ identities and identifications will be strengthened with what they are supposed to be doing at their workplace’ (Alvesson 1990: 374).

Cornelissen (2004) expanded this view by pointing to the relevance of social construction. Corporate and organisational identity is seen as closely related together, as ‘two sides of a coin’ (2004: 71): the former is concerned with differentiating the company in the interaction with stakeholders, whereas the latter is based on processes of sense-making in the company which can differ from what the company projected as its corporate identity.
CORPORATE COMMUNICATION REVIEWED: A DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE

The mainstream approach to corporate communication has not yet delivered convincing answers, however, to precisely the kind of question that explains in depth how processes of communicating, including those of identity formation, reveal their performative capacity. This request, as such, is not new. The need to review managed communication has been put forward for quite a while. Drucker (1974) was among the very first who pointed out that communication is not the means of conducting business, but the mode. More recently, Tsoukas (1997) criticized the predominance of the container metaphor (Schramm 1948; Shannon and Weaver 1949) which is still one of the predominant concepts in many communication and branding textbooks (Buttle 1995; Varey 2000).

This research project breaks out of the positivist research approach. Alternatively, it is proposed that reviewing corporate communication processes from a discourse perspective (e.g. Grant, Keenoy et al. 1998; Schiffrin, Tannen et al. 2001) provides a new way to conceptualize company life. At the same, treating corporate identity as discourse rather than a management instrument helped to explain the relation between substantive and symbolic interaction involved in processes of identity formation. At the same time, this lead to a detailed explanation of the affectual contours and ambiguities (Iedema, Rhodes et al. 2005) that characterize discourse focusing on identity formation at Intech.

Similar to Drucker’s (1974) proposal to view communication as a mode of management, communication is defined as a core process of organizing. This notion was initially advanced by Karl Weick (1979). Weick’s theory of organization examines the actual behaviors in the dynamic process of organizing, moving the perspective from the entity to processes. The view is that of action and process as people perceive messages and create
meanings in response. Organization arises through the interlocked behaviours of company members. In this theory, Weick stresses human interactions, information processing and communication as central activities. The point is that companies do not exist independently of their members, but are ‘created and recreated in the acts of communication between members’ (Iedema and Wodak 1999: 7).

These cycles of talking and writing are generally referred to as ‘discourse’ (Grant, Hardy et al. 2004: 3). Corporate communication activities come under this definition (Huebner 2007) – as an instance of the company’s social practice (Grant, Hardy et al. 2004), constitutive of social reality (Phillips and Hardy 2002) and, as such, contributing to the ‘social becoming’ of the company (Sztompka 1991).

Within several discursive approaches to organization, Keenoy, Oswick et al. (1997) identified two dominant epistemologies, one modernist and one social-constructionist, ‘reflecting an understanding of organizations as monologic and dialogic entities, respectively’ (Bargiela-Chiappini 2004: 3). The alternative view of corporate communication which is advanced, i.e. viewing communicative action and practice as constructive of social and organizational reality (Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Heracleous 2003), follows the social constructionist paradigm.

The stance taken in this study includes acknowledging the constitutive and transformative capacities of communication (Bargiela-Chiappini 2004), which in the following discussions will also be referred to as ‘performative’ capacity (Watson 1997; Feldman 2000). Corporate communication is seen as an engine of the social world as acknowledged in constitutive discourse (Mumby and Clair 1997), as well as shaping practices as suggested by the transformative discourse perspective (Deetz 2001).
DISCURSIVE ASPECTS IN IDENTITY FORMATION

According to a discourse perspective, it is argued that identity is created (and changed) in communication. This involves processes of ‘co-orientation’ (Taylor 2004) towards one common purpose – above introduced as the orthodox concept of ‘corporate identity’ – of the company. The perspectives stakeholders hold, ‘are not dictated by managers but negotiated by the players inside and outside of the company’ (Heath 1994: 32). Heath termed the performative capacity of communication in this process as ‘coordination’ – not understood in a direct and functional sense, but by ‘creating the understanding members need to coordinate their efforts with one another and with external audiences’ (1994: 59).

Research has shown that certain key themes recur continuously when analysing discourse related to corporate identity formation in organisations (Huebner 2007). One set of concepts is generally related to the process of managing the ‘totality’ of a company, i.e. its ‘core idea’ or ‘basic nature’, which in the course of this study will be referred to as the ‘business concept’ in a substantive sense (Alvesson 2002: 71-76). The other set of concepts emerges around the notion of identity. Viewed from a discourse perspective, ‘identity is closely related to the ways living systems make sense of themselves and their environments’ (Cheney, Christensen et al. 2004: 107). Identity, then, becomes fluid, closely related to what companies say and do and how its members and stakeholders construct their identity. This kind of identity is also embedded in the company culture and its underlying values (Albert 1998; Hatch and Schultz 2002).

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2 In the course of this study, culture is not treated as a concept separate from identity. Instead, the Hatch and Schultz (2002) model of culture is assumed which suggests that a company’s culture is always part of the company’s identity. According to this model, company members and other stakeholders implicate their company’s culture in their identity dynamics.
Following Alvesson (1994) three different types of relations between business concept and identity are possible: either identity reflects business concept, or the business concept produces identity, or identity forms a source for business concept. In each of these cases, business concept and identity are in a reciprocal relationship and influence each other (Ashforth and Mael 1996). Most research on identity, as has also been argued above, indicates the importance of coherence between both concepts (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). A strong identity can guide companies in their strategy and be a source for difference. On the other hand, strategy can inform identity by giving guidance with regards to who the company wants to be. Therefore, it is important that members of a company share at least some common ground on what the company represents (Ashforth and Mael 1996). This, from a management viewpoint, can be enacted through substantive and symbolic management. While substantive management includes concrete decisions like organisational changes, symbolic management refers to the ways in which management portrays the organization.

Peers play a major role in the negotiating process of identity and business concept (Deetz, Tracy et al. 2000). Leaders can have important effects on the interpretive frames of employees. People respond to the meanings they have for words and events rather than to the words and events themselves (Deetz, Tracy et al. 2000: 67). Ashforth and Mael (1996: 40-41) add another dimension to this when they make the point that, ‘if identity constitutes the soul of a company, then employees regard themselves as the ‘rightful custodian’, whereas they may view strategic decision-making a legitimate domain of management’. In other words, even if business concept and identity are communicated clearly (the ambition in orthodox corporate communication theory), it is not necessarily the case that people respond to it in the intended way or that business concept and identity even re-enforce each other.
THE INTECH CASE

In order to explain the above position, this case study focuses on the analysis of corporate communication discourse at Intech, one of the major industrial conglomerates based in Germany. With over 150 years of company history and with over 400,000 employees worldwide, Intech represents one of the large companies, spanning products, solutions and services in the broad field of technology solutions. Two separate functions, each staffed with over 100 employees, managed the strategy and communication processes at Intech.

As highlighted in the Appendix, a situational focus (Alvesson and Deetz 2000: 201) on the launch of the Intech management system (IMS) was essential. The IMS was one of the core Intech projects during the 15 months observation period between 2003 and 2005 when communication processes focusing on business concept and identity were took place at both corporate and business unit levels.

A whole range of communication instruments was implemented in order to support the goals of the IMS, e.g. a new semi-annual corporate magazine for managers with news and interviews on proceedings in terms of the IMS, an intranet website with detailed information regarding the status of company programs and initiatives, and a new “Communications Excellence Program”, an IMS-focused training initiative.

Data collection focused on all corporate communication discourse during the launch of the Intech management system. Corporate communication discourse was defined as including, on the one hand, all corporate communication materials produced on the occasion of the Intech management system by Intech’s corporate communication departments. On the other, naturally occurring talk and interviews of two groups of managers directly involved in
corporate communication discourse were monitored, namely strategy and communication managers on senior and middle levels\(^3\). The total stock of text, naturally occurring talk and interviews, covering both strategy and communication managers, constitute corporate communication discourse at Intech, as used for the purpose of this study. The volume of text generated this way covers 180,000 words, represented in 1,227 discourse fragments, 246 of which focused on issues related to decision-making (Huebner 2007).

\(^3\) Other organisational groups essentially adopted the role of consumers of the texts produced by the strategy and corporate communication professionals at Intech, i.e. these groups did not actively participate in the processes forming corporate communication events and materials. Nevertheless, these groups decided on how to treat the information provided, e.g. by developing various modes of turning strategy into action. This aspect is not neglected, but referred to in detail in thematic and discourse analyses throughout this thesis.
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Based on the theoretical insights gained earlier, discourse analysis was applied to explain the role of corporate communication discourse in identification processes at Intech. Rather than supporting the managerial approach ‘to make sure that organizational members identify with the organization’ (Cheney, Christensen et al. 2004: 128), discourse analysis helped to explain that corporate communication discourse at Intech formed an essential part of multi-layered and multi-faceted processes of identity formation, leading to a continuous negotiation and reconstruction of meaning and identity throughout the organization (Iedema, Rhodes et al. 2005). In a first step, the reciprocal relation between the notions of business concept and identity was analysed in more depth. Subsequently, analysis focused on aspects of how identity was negotiated at Intech, based on the corporate communication discourse initiated by communication and strategy managers.

Insight into the reciprocal relation between business concept and identity

Both of the following fragments of discourse illustrate how corporate communication discourse linked into the interplay between business concept and identity. This discourse happened predominantly in daily conversations around the purpose of the company. The examples were taken from discourse at Intech business unit which during the observation phase was involved in an ongoing discussion around its long-term purpose. Positioning Intech business unit as a captive company was a particular concern of top management. This view is represented in the first discourse fragment. The second fragment represents the view of middle managers which had advocated a stronger focus on the positioning of Intech business unit in external markets. The third fragment contains discourse on the ‘balancing’ act between captive and external positioning.
The following fragment resulted from a presentation held at an event with Intech business unit employees. The event was part of a series of quarterly town hall meetings at different locations. The sessions had the aim of informing about business performance in a timely manner after regular quarterly reporting to Intech corporation’s top management. Intech business unit’s corporate communication department prepared and organized these events. The presentations were recorded, edited in a news report format and broadcasted to all Intech business unit employees via Intranet. On that occasion a member of Intech business unit’s management board said, based on a presentation chart showing the organisational structure of Intech business unit:

‘Given this fairly heterogeneous picture, in terms of products, in terms of regions, you might find it hard to give an answer on what is our market positioning. How can we bring clarity to who we are? No doubt, there is financial expertise, and there is industrial know-how. So, our market position is just in-between. In the market for financial products, we are a company which drives financial expertise and industrial competence at the same time. That’s where we position ourselves. And at the same time, we are in another very important niche. We are a captive company. We survive as a captive company, and within the captive market segment, we are one of the large players. We are fairly large compared to other captive companies who would focus their efforts on the same kind of things we are in. ... And that reflects being part of [Intech], which in itself is a fairly unique company. That gives us a special niche, a specialized product range, specialized services. We are solution-oriented because that’s what we are grown up with, and clearly we will maintain activities close to [Intech] needs.’

(General manager, Intech business unit) [36:4]

This discourse fragment follows the strategic purpose to explain and clarify the positioning of Intech business unit. The presentation was held in a one-way non-mediated
way and can be seen as an attempt to overcome the struggle with Intech’s business concept which had been a point of discussion above.

The overall mood of the discourse can be described as declarative. It remains on a fairly abstract level: examples are missing, and ongoing struggles like the ones with dualities which had been identified in thematic analysis are avoided. Both themes – business concept and identity – are addressed. The argument begins with a statement regarding the ‘heterogeneous picture’, which is described by several elements of the business concept, like products and regions. Heterogeneity is assumed here rather than illustrated by examples. Following the logic of problem and solution, the manager then switches to identity discourse to show a solution for the heterogeneity issue and ‘to bring clarity to who we are’. Assuming that financial expertise and industrial knowledge are key elements of the company’s identity, a position ‘in-between’ is sought. In terms of modality, a high level of commitment can be assigned to these statements, repeating and asserting that this is indeed the identity of the company. This statement can also be seen as a typical example for the professed identity of Intech business unit. Alvesson (1994: 389) identified a similar approach by top management to interpreting a company by combinations of characterizations, concluding that identity in his case was rather ‘loosely connected to what people are really doing in the company’. This observation also holds for Intech business unit, where defining the identity of the company through combining financial expertise and industrial knowledge was fairly accepted, but not deeply reflected in actual business practice.

Discourse in the above fragment, however, does not end here. The manager returns to elements of the business concept in a paratactic grammatical relation – by stating that ‘at the same time’ the company is a captive company. In this, business concept and identity have been used ‘reciprocally’ (Ashforth and Mael 1996: 33), referring back and forth. This argument is of additive character, stressing the role and the benefits of the captive definition several times – namely the resulting size for Intech business unit, presence in special niches and a range of activities which is close to the needs of Intech corporation. Not discussed are disadvantages of being a captive provider. Also possible ambiguities between market and captive positioning (see thematic analysis) are not a subject of discussion.

A similar interplay of argument between business concept and identity-related characteristics happens in the second section of text which was taken from a discussion
which happened between members of the corporate communication team and a marketing manager following up on the above presentation. This discourse fragment represents naturally occurring talk about the interplay of identity and business concept. The manager said:

‘[Intech business unit] cannot escape this role as a captive financing provider. But we have to think what the long-term drivers are. It can be an approach that we combine telephones to power plants with financial services, so that not all the time people think about [our major competitor]. That’s the challenge for us, and we have to think about growth that will come from the operating companies, no doubt. We could do a lot more. ... But putting that at one time, where do we want to be? We don’t want to be seen as purely a captive financing provider. We want to be seen as a financing provider which has a captive portfolio and which has an external portfolio.’

(Intech business unit manager) [21:5]

To start with, the manager implicitly refers back to the ongoing discourse around the captive and external positioning of Intech business unit. She extends her argument from a view on the business concept, making the statement that Intech business unit ‘cannot escape this role as a captive financing provider’. Level of commitment towards the business concept, here, is much lower than with the general manager’s statement which had been analyzed previously. The manager sees the captive role rather as a necessity than a huge benefit. He continues by illustrating the combination of financial expertise and industrial know-how with a concrete example – and, by doing this, moves on to identity discourse. His suggestion is to use the combination of product and financial services as an element of projected identity in order to differentiate Intech business unit from its competitors. In the next sentence, however, it is referred back to business concept, making the rhetorical link
that enforcing captive business would also help to achieve the business goal of growth. This way, the manager links elements of business concept with ‘substantive’ management – involving ‘real, material change in organizational practices’ (Ashforth and Mael 1996: 35). Similarly, parallels between symbolic management and managing identity can be drawn (Alvesson 1990). However, ultimately the network of relations between business concept and identity culminates in ‘continual, reciprocal interactions’ (Ashforth and Mael 1996: 35).

Another indicator for a low level of commitment, the manager questions this statement afterwards by asking ‘where do we want to be?’ This leads back to identity discourse, focusing on the aspect of professed identity. The manager’s commitment now increases by asserting that ‘we want to be seen’ in a specific way. In talking about identity that way, often self-fulfilling consequences are expected, but not necessarily fulfilled (Alvesson 1994).

A resolution to the duality of captive versus external portfolio is sought by putting both captive ‘and’ external portfolio on the same level. This can be interpreted as another one of the ‘balancing acts’ which are necessary to resolve dualities in business concept discourse.

The analysis of the two examples of discourse confirmed that there is a reciprocal relation between business concept and identity discourse. As the general manager’s as well as the marketing manager’s discourse showed, this relationship is mutually reinforcing, i.e. business concept does not determine identity, nor does identity determine business concept and strategy. Instead, the arguments show that there is a continuous switch between identity and business concept discourse, with each used to argue in favour or against the other in a rhetorical game. This points towards a ‘loosely coupled’ relation between identity and
business concept (Ashforth and Mael 1996: 33). Identity and business concept do not necessarily reinforce each other, instead, they can even be played off against each other at different levels of discourse.

This analysis confirms that the orthodox definition of corporate identity does not reveal the full picture. Orthodox theory ‘suggests that by strengthening the organization’s identity – its experienced distinctiveness, consistency and stability – it can be assumed that individuals’ identities and identifications will be strengthened with what they are supposed to be doing at their workplace’ (Alvesson 1990: 374). This re-enforcing relation between identity and business concept is according to the above statements not necessarily given.

Both fragments of discourse also highlighted the concept of dualities in identity and business concept discourse (Normann 2001) as a common phenomenon in organisations. On the one hand, companies try to manifest an identity and a strategy. On the other, they are changing permanently, driven by forces from business context, from their own actions and the discourses which they frame. Moved by this dynamism, every company has to find as its identity ‘some kind of harmony, fit, consonance’ (Normann 2001: 146) – or the ‘balance’, as Intech business unit’s general manager framed it. This balance, however, is never fixed or static. With continuous changes in context and with continuous change enforced by the company’s own actions, change becomes continuity (Normann 2001: 151).

As the above examples have shown, corporate communication discourse plays an important role in managing this balance between identity and business concept in a highly context-sensitive environment. The discursive role, however, is not to impose a certain corporate identity, as orthodox corporate communication theory suggests, but to share different views which can be achieved in an open-ended process in which all participants
discover and see things that they did not know before. This resembles a process of bringing together communication ‘in seemingly disparate areas’ which are not to be made identical but whose ‘common features can be productively examined from the perspectives of communication’ (Cheney and Christensen 2001: 233).

Analyzing the role of corporate communication discourse in negotiating identity

Having made the point that identity and business concept are constantly being produced, reproduced and altered in the ongoing discourse, the focus of this subsection is now to give some insight into how corporate communication discourse interferes in processes of identification – defined as ‘the process of emerging identity’ (Scott, Corman et al. 1998: 304), indicating ‘the degree to which a member defines himself or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes defines the organization’ (Morgan, Reynolds et al. 2004: 365).

As Scott, Corman et al. (1998: 305) have pointed out, communication in the form of ‘actual, hypothesized, or even retrospectively examined interaction’ is viewed as essential to the development of identification. The background for that is that it is mostly through communication that we express our belongingness to companies and that we assess identity (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). Some authors go even further and state that there is a regular shift from substantive ways of constructing identity to increasingly occurring in the imaginary realm (Kärreman and Alvesson 2004), for example facilitated by managerial approaches to corporate communication.

The second aspect which Scott, Corman et al. (1998: 324) raised with regards to negotiating identity is that they advocated local analysis of identification processes. The reason for that is that multiple identities (e.g. organisation, work-team and personal
identities) frame every situation. Given these multiple identities, conflict between groups and
identities ‘is both common and integral to the construction of a collective identity’ (Kuhn
and Nelson 2002: 11). However, conflict and negotiation can facilitate and strengthen the
identification process. In other words: ‘As employees discuss their identities, they become
their identities. In turn, as employees assess the identification process, they will reveal in
their narratives the sources of inspiration for those identities’ (Morgan, Reynolds et al. 2004:
362).

The aim of this subsection is to shed light on the question of which elements and processes
of corporate communication discourse shaped the identification of Intech members and how
identity was negotiated in this concrete case.

The examples for this analysis are taken from corporate communication discourse
happening at Intech corporation. The following discourse fragment was taken from a
moderated discussion round between the general manager of Intech and corporate
communication professionals from Intech’s different regions and business units. The
discussion formed part of the semi-annual internal corporate communication conference at
Intech. It was embedded in a series of events which were held in a two-way mediated mode.

[Moderator]: ‘Can you give us your view of the customer perspective, how should
they think about [Intech]?’
[Manager]: Yes, that’s not actually difficult at all. We just have to look at our roots
and fix that. If you have a company that is over 150 years old, you can be pretty sure
that there is something really good in the roots. … I think the gene code that we have
is a very good one. It has always been around. We want to set the pace in certain
industries. We want also to be commercially successful. Commercially successful
innovation, this is setting the pace in an industry. That’s what we want, and that’s
the best for our customers also. The customer is literally out for a few things: bring
the performance up, bring the costs down. We have seen that in the logic of many. In
the past that has been a conflicting thing, but we know, to many examples in our
company, that it’s not conflicting, actually a very good mechanism to do two things
at the same time. I think that’s something. The other thing, now, really from the first days on, is: we are an international company. I’m sure you have experience with this in here. How much fun is this? I mean over lunch, over a short break, you talk to a colleague and realize how different the perspective of that individual is. And this perspective you would otherwise only have gathered not as credible as from somebody who is living in that environment. I think that is the strength that we have.’

(Intech general manager) [108:7]

To start with, the moderator asks the CEO about the attributed identity he expects to be perceived by customers. In his answer, he replies immediately by quoting and interpreting manifested identity. Manifested identity, in this case is used in order to underpin the assumption that the existing ‘gene code’ is ‘good’. This step in the discourse can also be interpreted as a ‘depersonalization’ of identity (Ashforth and Mael 1996: 43), a categorization which is generally seen as a sign for a strong identity and identification with the company. This, taken one step further, can even lead to ‘depersonalized trust’ (1996: 44), meaning trust which is based on a common social identity which ‘does not require prior interaction with every individual’.

At the same time, however, by referring back to the historical dimension of the gene code, negotiation of identity is avoided, particularly when considering the audience which – as communicators – are not simply passive receivers of corporate efforts to shape their identification but are active participants in constructing their identities (Scott 1997). Instead, the general manager uses an external logic – a company which is 150 years old must have a good gene code – in Cheney and Frenette’s terms serving as a kind of ‘overarching or superordinate value premises to which subordinate or subsidiary values … are connected or contributory’ (Cheney and Frenette 1993: 55).
Larson and Pepper (2003: 544) in their attempt to categorize strategies and tactics for managing the ongoing identity contest in companies detected similar practices in concluding: ‘These rhetorical justifications are important in the management of identifications because they allow people to rationalize their identity choices as normal and natural’.

Intech’s general manager, in the above discourse fragment continues on this strategy of external logic by quoting customer needs in the form of the assumption that ‘the customer is literally out for a few things’. He uses additive and elaborative semantic relations to make his point clear, and repeatedly relates to the ‘logic of many’ or ‘to many examples’.

According to Larson and Pepper’s categorization this corresponds to the tactic of ‘implied support’ which is ‘usually played out in subtle ways as individuals indirectly mentioned that others held similar beliefs’ (2003: 548). Referencing ‘the logic of many’ is used to argue that bringing performance up and costs down at the same time is not a conflicting thing.

The general manager repeats his strategies of forming identity with regards to the second element of the ‘gene code’ in the above statement: that Intech is an international company. He makes the point that Intech has been an international company since its foundation and uses a tactic of ‘direct support’ (Larson and Pepper 2003: 548) – ‘I am sure you have an experience with this here’ – by directly involving the company members which were present at the event itself.

Another conspicuous characteristic of the statement is the high level of commitment the manager demonstrates in terms of Fairclough’s (2003) framework for discourse analysis. The overall style of discourse is very assertive, and can also be interpreted as an attempt to enact identity. This was explained by Ashforth and Mael (1996: 45) in that ‘the more a member identifies with the organization, … the more he or she will think, act, and feel in ways consistent with that identity and strategy’. He uses identity as a ‘lens’ to separate good from bad, to judge importance, and therefore, also enters the moral arena of discourse.
This is the point where critical communication scholars make the point that negotiating identity needs to happen in a collaborative way. Then, a collaborative approach to negotiating is less a moral choice than a necessity, because people create meanings around words in a continuous process and respond to these meanings rather than to the events happening in reality (Deetz, Tracy et al. 2000). The statement made, therefore, is rarely the statement received, unless the meaning of words is created in a collaborative rather than an adversarial way (Gray 1991).

The next discourse fragment provides an example of how a corporate communication tool influenced the process of negotiating identity from the viewpoint of one manager and how that manager experienced participation during that process. The discourse fragment was taken from a story the manager told the researcher about an event which was held at one of Intech’s German locations to introduce the new Intech management system. The conversation took place in an informal atmosphere following a workshop among corporate communicators in the manager’s office. In this face-to-face situation, the manager was very emotional about the communication tools which had been put in place by the corporate communication department, particular an online discussion forum which was set up on the Intech corporation intranet:

‘There used to be a forum which was established before this event. There was the discussion forum. Hopefully it has gone. ... If you set up a forum, what’s the idea behind it? There are two options. One, you say we set up a forum and let it run. See if people put in comments. But even if you do that, you should at least keep an eye on it. Two, and my idea behind it: if you set up a forum and somebody puts in a critical question, can they expect an answer from the people who set up this forum? It’s a question that we don’t understand what this has to do with our day-to-day business. Can you expect somebody else in the forum to answer that or is there an obligation
of the people who are so clever to set up this forum to also provide an answer. No. So many questions in there, and no answer.’

(Intech manager) [83:19]

The manager, in this fragment, reports on how he experienced participation in the Intranet forum. By applying a number of contrasting semantic relations, he first of all accuses the corporate communication department for not taking care of content in that forum, and for not facilitating the question and answer process which is necessary to make participation in this forum a two-way process. Frustration and cynicism are his reactions to the fact that many employees want to participate in the process of identity-building: employees ask questions, but do not receive replies to their questions.

This example illustrates both opportunities and threats associated with corporate communication activities intended to contribute to identity negotiation. On the one hand, it demonstrates in practice that ‘communication functions as an intervening variable in participation outcomes’ (Seibold and Shea 2001: 685) and can make an immediate difference (Scott, Connaughton et al. 1999). On the other, it also shows that if corporate communication activities are carried out in the form of ‘pseudo-actions’ (Alvesson 1990: 387) – i.e. ‘only for the sake of affecting perceptions of an audience, without being recognized as having that intention’ – they can easily become counter-productive in the minds of the recipients.

This point has been further analysed in Kuhn and Nelson’s work (2002) who draw attention to the perceived position of members in a communication network which also plays a crucial role in negotiating identity. The more intensively members participated in activities relevant in the identification process, the more consistent their identification was afterwards. It becomes an important aspect that substantive communication activities, then, not only need to be substantive in terms of content, but also in terms of participation. Collaboration
requires a ‘different attitude’ towards communication (Deetz, Tracy et al. 2000: 113) – one that takes dialogue seriously. In Czarniawska’s (1997: 49) words, identity may be conceptualized as a ‘continuous process of narration where both the narrator and the audience are involved in formulating, editing, applauding, and refusing various elements of the ever-produced narrative’.

It was argued, above, that this ongoing process of identity negotiation involves multiple identity discourses. Touraine (1995) suggested the metaphor of contest in which dominant repertoires or discourses are continually reconstructed in interaction. Several authors (e.g. Humphreys and Brown 2002; Kreiner and Ashforth 2004) have contributed to a differentiated picture of the ways members of a company acquire identities. It is argued that, in summary, there are four possible kinds of relationship between individual and company identities as an outcome of identity negotiation: identification, disidentification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification. Only the first of these four possible outcomes is the intended outcome which is referred to in orthodox corporate communication theory.

The next example illustrates how identity contest emerged in a concrete case. The discourse section is taken from a conversation with a manager, who observed a project of reconstructing the entrance area at Intech’s head offices and interpreted the meaning from his individual viewpoint. The fragment is part of naturally occurring talk:

‘Do you remember the big construction site at [Intech head offices]? I will tell you the story. They were building a whole summer and winter there. So we asked: what are they doing? It must be something amazing with all this noise ... We all had the impression there must be coming something fantastic. And I said: do you know what we get? Stairs! We get stairs? And Louis XIV could have walked up there. In the year 2002 we end up with what? Stairs? We were expecting a fitness centre, a restaurant, something that says the 21st century has arrived. What do we get? Stairs
from medieval France. And you start: what does this tell us? What the hell are we trying to communicate? What the hell is this organisation about? People on massive stairs. You could have built an escalator and the space underneath, you could have had a fitness centre for 500 people, you could have done something innovative, you could have had a café, Starbucks come in and do something, whatever, right? Now we have got stairs. And what is on the stairs? Nothing.’
(Intech manager) [82:16]

The main theme covered is the symbolic meaning of building a new staircase at the company’s head offices. The statement reveals the high level of emotion this project has created for the manager and the high level of personal struggle associated with related processes of identity negotiation. The fragment shows that ‘discourses, roles and narratives are all involved – they fuel and constrain identity work’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

First of all, the manager perceived the construction work in the entrance of the building as a literal offering for cognitive information production in the sense described by Schmidt (2004). He also gave evidence for the intertextuality of this kind of discourse: he did not only think on his own what these construction activities mean, but he started conversations about this issue with his colleagues. In the course of these conversations, expectations started to rise, culminating in the idea that ‘something fantastic’ must be coming. Disappointment and cynicism was the reaction when the manager and his colleagues found out that a staircase was going to be the result – which was obviously something which had not been in line with their common sense. The symbol of ‘Louis XIV’ – a concrete persona – was quoted, and a process of discussing “what does this tell us?” was put into operation. The managers had started to negotiate identity. They used the offering to do so, but they did not reply to the provider of the offering. Instead, they concluded for themselves that the company is about ‘people on massive stairs’.
This example for illustrating the process of negotiating identity pulls attention to a conclusion Alvesson (2002) had drawn with regards to cultural processes in general: negotiation of identity often takes place unconsciously in everyday interactions. In other words, organisations exist in a ‘pattern of ongoing action-interaction’ (Smircich and Stubbart 1985: 727). And, as Cheney, Christensen et al. have recently concluded (2004: 126): ‘Identity management is carried out not only by managers with communication responsibilities but also by rank-and-file members who identify with the organization’.

In summary, processes of identification in the Intech case lead to the conclusion that corporate communication discourse provides the offering to start communication, but it is often beyond the control of managers which processes of sense-making happen at the local level. Rather than thinking about culture and identity in sweeping statements like the good overall organisational identity, Alvesson, therefore, calls for ‘local adaptation and case-by-case evaluation’ (2002: 173).
CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE ROLE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

DISCOURSE IN IDENTITY FORMATION

Drawing on the findings of discourse analysis leads to a revised and richer picture of corporate communication discourse as a mode of affective organising.

First of all, it became clear that the processes of identification at Intech are less consistent than the notion of corporate identity in orthodox corporate communication theory suggested. Instead, a rather complex web of themes around two reciprocal discourses, namely ‘business concept’ and ‘identity’ have emerged. Substantive as well as symbolic forms of management contribute to balance both sides of the purpose medal, whereas a singular focus on either of them can cause significant ambiguities for both business concept and identity. Discourse analysis, in addition, provided insight into processes of negotiating identity at Intech. Corporate communication discourse needed to pass a contest among company members.

Based on the analyses so far, the following conclusions with regards to corporate communication discourse as a mode of affective organising can be drawn.

Communicating as participating in affectualized work

The analysis has shown that processes related to business concept and identity cannot be explained and managed by a model of communication which purely consists of source, message and receiver. As the examples above have shown, corporate communication participates in and influences many processes of identification, and not all consequences of identity-related communication are foreseeable. Therefore, in line with Cheney and Christensen (2001: 243), it needs to be realized ‘that communication is not an unproblematic
solution to crises or queries over identity’. Instead, in many cases communication is part of
the identity problem.

Another important point in this overall frame is that communication processes
related to business concept and identity are not all in the hands of corporate communication
managers. All members of a company and external stakeholders participate actively in
creating identities. Not only are there multiple identities competing among each other, there
are also various levels of identity influencing each other. As has been shown above, many
corporate communication activities, particularly those contributing to mediated container
forms of communication, like newsletters, brochures and image campaigns, rather work as
communication offerings than as actively ‘managed’ forms of communication. In the
complex reciprocal web of themes between business concept and identity – i.e. substantive
and symbolic forms of management – it remains at least questionable to what extent the
intended outcomes of the providers of communication instruments can be reached – or at
least tracked.

Christensen and Cheney go even further and argue that, particularly regarding the
recent euphoria for identity, companies should ‘reconsider radically the role that their formal
communication campaigns play in the market of symbols and messages of today’ (2000:
246). In the quest for distinctiveness and visibility as well as accreditation and legitimacy, it
can be concluded that many companies run the risk of communicating messages that are
more relevant to the sender than to the receiver. Cheney and Christensen call this
phenomenon ‘auto-communication – that is, communication through which organizations
establish and affirm their own self-images or their own cultures’ (2000: 252). As the above
analysis suggests, auto-communication cannot only become a waste of resources, it also
bears the risk that this kind of communication processes and practices leads to ‘affectualized work’ (Iedema, Rhodes et al. 2005: 333), i.e. increased emotionalization and fields of tension.

This does not interfere with the findings of former research that a strong identity is crucial for companies (Ashforth and Mael 1996; Albert, Ashforth et al. 2000) and that companies are important points of identification for employees and many other stakeholders (Christensen and Cheney 2000). The point is rather to be aware of the complex processes associated with negotiating business concept and identity, as well as the reciprocal relation between these two concepts.

**Balancing substance and symbols as two sides of the same coin**

Alvesson has, from a general management viewpoint, for quite a while made the point that companies have developed from substance to symbols (Alvesson 1990; Alvesson 2002). He sees this as a consequence of cultural changes and the associated complexity of society, the expansion of the service sector and a resulting increased interest in images, as well as an expanded role of mass media – which has finally resulted in an increase of ‘pseudo-events’. A pseudo-event, in Alvesson’s terms, ‘is a happening which is not spontaneous, but has been planned for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced’ (Alvesson 1990: 383). These kinds of events are purely created for publicity reasons. Corporate communication is one of the management processes which, until today, is most influenced by symbolic management ideas (Alvesson and Berg 1992).

Symbolic communication has evolved as a comparably straightforward tool to manage communication – straightforward compared with the complexity of processes it initiates in reality as documented in the Intech case. A lot of effort is put into these tasks, and
a large proportion of the communication industry today focuses on these aspects. Yet, it is precisely the primarily symbolic approach to identity and communication that becomes more and more criticized by many stakeholder groups (Ind 2003).

As the analysis has shown, in real business life symbolic and substantive management always go hand in hand. Managers and other members of the company continuously moved back and forth between elements of business concept and identity when talking and arguing about the company’s purpose. In all discourse fragments which were analyzed, substantive elements were part of the game. However, ‘the significance of such ‘substantive’ activities as productive work, the structuring of tasks, the formalization of procedures, the technical and bureaucratic control of work, cost management and the reproduction of power relationships is often neglected’ (Alvesson 2002: 146). The results of this study so far confirm this view and lead to the conclusion that identity work cannot be done without substantive underpinning work. Business concept and identity are two sides of the same coin, as are strategy and communication work.

The analysis has also shown that due to its complexity, corporate communication discourse only becomes meaningful in a concrete business context. This suggests that corporate communication should also start to move away from generalizing image and corporate identity work and find ways to embody itself in business-related processes with all stakeholders. This is the level where coherence can also be achieved when communication is viewed from a discourse perspective: a strong identity can be achieved when local talk becomes coherent and captures the appeal of what people see as important, meaningful and relevant.
Facilitating participation in identity negotiation processes

In addition to the increasing importance of substantive communication, a need to provide suitable means for negotiating business concept and identity in corporate communication discourse can be concluded from the above analysis. This increasing need is partly based on the emotional involvement of employees and other stakeholders with identity issues. Other recent studies have confirmed that identification presupposes participatory involvement, particularly in companies with multiple identities (Larson and Pepper 2003). Intech surely is an example of that: identities compete at several levels, e.g. corporation with business unit levels, but also organisational with professional levels, e.g. business unit identity with identities as IT, finance or HR professionals.

Additional difficulties of actually managing communication by focusing on business concept and identity arise from the fact that many orthodox corporate communication products which are intended to enforce identity, actually need to be understood as offerings to communicate rather than ‘containers’ shipping identity to the recipients. Mantovani and Spagnolli concluded that ‘semiotic mediation emerges … as the basic function of artifacts and increasingly informs their previously basic function of “producing” things’ (2000: 224). Viewing corporate communication products like newsletters, internet pages, brochures, advertisements, etc. as artifacts in Mantovani and Spagnolli’s sense, they become part of the identity negotiating process – for example as part of the context for negotiations. This leaves communication products open to multiple interpretations. Communication managers need to be aware of this. Smircich and Stubbart had this point in mind when they several years ago stated: ‘But, in strategic management, multiple interpretations often are viewed as communication problems to be overcome by more information, rather than as a natural state
of affairs’ (1985: 731). The alternative corporate communication perspective moves away from this interpretation and suggests that negotiation, even if conducted in a diverse manner, is necessary and healthy.

Careful attention, therefore, also needs to be given to the negotiation process itself. Deetz (1997) argues that reacting to symptoms, e.g. by understanding negotiation as the mere expression of interests, is not enough, i.e. ‘to say’ is not the same as ‘having decided together’, and ‘having a meeting is not itself a democratic act’ (1997: 135). Instead, supporting Deetz’ argument, the task for corporate communication needs to be to contribute to mutually satisfying decisions supporting the purpose of the company. Corporate communication processes need to be transformed with a focus on participation in, rather than control of, identity and business concept. Meaning of identity needs to be created in negotiation taking the “other” serious. Members of the company need to be understood as both processor and expresser at the same time. In this context, images and symbols still play a central role in the creation of identities – but it is no longer the images’ and symbols’ consumption which counts. Instead, their ability to link people with likeminded individuals becomes of higher interest (Cova 1996).

The success of negotiation, then, is directly linked to the quality of communication it is based on (Stacey 2003). Pursuing this quest for quality, identity-related communication can become what Schmidt called a ‘programme of competence to solve problems, which lends acting and communicating of company members commonly accepted sense’ (2004: 195). Otherwise, when identities are protected in orthodox concepts of corporate identity, distortion (Deetz 1995) is likely to happen.
Giving up on a one-way managerial identity process, however, does not necessarily mean to lose control of the company’s communication offerings. While stakeholders insist on being involved in the creation of identities, actively engaging in negotiation gives companies ‘the ability to have as great a control as is possible and, maybe more importantly, the only possibility to maintain livelihood in the complex, fluid, and highly dynamic postmodern markets’ (Christensen, Torp et al. 2005: 165).
APPENDIX: ON METHODOLOGY

This paper presents the results of an interpretive research project (Denzin 1994; Schwandt 1994) conducted between October 2003 and October 2005 at ‘Intech’, a large international conglomerate based in Germany (Huebner 2007). The aim was to make sense of ‘the thick of what is going on’ (Stake 2003: 149) through an ‘iterative process of interaction and integration of theory and empirical data’ (Brown 1998: 39).

Results are presented as a single case study (Yin 1994; Stake 2003), following an ethnographic process (Tedlock 2003), which was conducted from a social constructionist worldview (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gergen 1994; Shotter and Gergen 1994; Gergen 2001).

Research design

In reply to concerns with regards to the feasibility and presentation of ethnographic case studies (e.g. Fetterman 1989; van Maanen 1995; Alvesson and Deetz 2000), a ‘situational focus’ (Alvesson and Deetz 2000: 201-207) was chosen. A second approach to reduce and manage complexities remaining within the focused definition of ethnography was to actively use extant theory, following a pragmatist pluralist approach (Watson 1994), i.e. only extant theories along the intellectual strands of the research project were used to inform the explanation.

Analytical strategy

The overall focus on theory-building made it necessary to lead the analysis process towards exploring the gap between orthodox and discursive forms of identity-related communication. This was achieved by developing a complete stocktaking and taxonomy of themes (McCurdy, Spradley et al. 2005) covered in corporate communication discourse at
Intech, based on naturally occurring talk, text and interviews collected throughout the observation period. Thematic analysis (Owen 1984) was chosen as a method for achieving this level of analysis. At the same time, it was necessary to add more interpretive and reflective methods in order to be able to deal with aspects of gaining a deeper understanding of how corporate communication discourse unfolds its performative capacity at Intech. Discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) emerged as the most suitable method in supporting exactly this part of the study’s purpose.

Two aspects appeared as important throughout the analysis process itself: (1) the extensive use of a computer-assisted data analysis software package (Diaz-Bone and Schneider 2003), name ATLAS.ti, and (2) the repeated use of extant theories (Weick 2003) to increase the depth of interpretation throughout the analysis process. Using computer-assistance allowed the efficient management of large amounts of primary data, but did not replace an in-depth discourse analysis which was conducted conventionally. Extant theories were used at several selective points during the analysis, e.g. where the analysis of codes in ATLAS.ti had not revealed a clear set of themes.

Table 1 summarises the overall analytical process.
### Table 1: Overview of analytical process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Steps in analysis process</th>
<th>Methods applied</th>
<th>Computer-aided [ATLAS.ti]</th>
<th>Use of extant theories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Data collection: Corporate communication discourse at Intech from October 2003 to December 2004</td>
<td>Participation as active member</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Identifying relevant quotations</td>
<td>Sorting</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Assigning generic codes (according to reference points in conceptual framework)</td>
<td>Sorting</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Developing taxonomies for each of the reference points</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>(X)⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Analysis of each of the themes as identified in the taxonomy</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gaining deeper insight into each of the themes from discourse and strategic practices perspectives</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Analysing discourse fragments assigned to each theme in order to identify and explain underlying communication practices</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
<td>(X)⁵</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Analysing interrelationships between the underlying communication practices</td>
<td>Intertextuality analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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⁴ Where necessary in order to structure the data.

⁵ ATLAS.ti software package used in order to retrieve relevant documents; actual discourse analysis of each of the fragments was conducted manually.
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