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Title:

Pre identities and founding identities

How references to the early stages of firm formation are used in organizational identity construction

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Since the seminal work of Albert & Whetten (1985), the concept of organizational identity has given rise to an increasingly popular perspective in organization studies. Together with other identity related concepts such as corporate identity (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997), social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and brand identity (Aaker, 1996) it has enriched our understanding of issues like organizational processes, internal and external marketing, as well as companies’ strategies. In their 1985 paper, Albert and Whetten presented their central, enduring, distinctive (CED) definition of organizational identity (OI), meaning that OI basically refers to aspects that are claimed to be central, enduring and distinctive about an organization. The Albert and Whetten definition has subsequently become debated and criticized (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), yet even for its critics it is still today an important point of reference, when developing and elaborating on the concept of organizational identity (Corley et al., 2006). Particularly the relationship of present to past identity has intrigued many scholars. Is organizational identity essentially about the enduring features of an organization, as Albert and Whetten

claimed, or is it a relatively fluid phenomenon as interpretivists and postmodernists would argue (Gioia et al., 1998)? The debate around stability and change in identity reveals that the temporal aspect of organizational identity is important for understanding the concept. How does it relate to the past? What meaning does organizational history have for the members of a firm when they make sense of its identity? In the present paper, we are going to look into these questions, putting special emphasis on the foundation of the firm as well the time preceding the foundation. Literature indicates that the foundation of a company is critical to the formation of its identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985) as well as its overall value system (Kimberly & Bouchikhi, 1995; Schein, 2004). Kimberly and Bouchikhi (1995) moreover state that processes preceding the actual foundation of an firm need to be included in an analysis in order to understand the organization, the ideas prevailing among its members and the context of its future development. In the present paper we are thus going to explore how processes before and during the formation of a firm influence the formation of identity. Furthermore, we are going to examine how contemporary organizational members relate to the history before and around the foundation of their firm when making sense of its identity.

Empirically, the paper is based on the case of the German media group “Rheinische Post” (MRP). The company started in 1946 as a license newspaper under the allied forces in occupied Germany and has subsequently developed into an internationalized media group. The case of MRP is particularly interesting as the historical context of post-war Germany as well as the recent experience of Nazi dictatorship played an important role for the foundation of the newspaper. The historical setting shaped the institutional context into which the company was born and the history of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich was crucial in shaping the beliefs and the motivation of key actors involved in the start-up process. During the more than 60 years of its existence, the company has undergone significant changes and developed into a diversified and international media group. Yet the original newspaper Rheinische Post (RP) still constitutes a central part of the firms operations. When making sense of their identity, the members of the organization refer to the origins of their firm and today’s owners and managers claim that the core values of the original newspaper are still alive in the company today. Being a media company, MRP is a classical case of a company with a hybrid identity as Albert and Whetten (1985) define it. On the one hand the firm has a utilitarian character as it is a business with the aim of generating profit. On the other hand, there is an important normative element to the identity of MRP as the publicist ideals of being a critical voice in and contributing to the development of a pluralist and democratic society play a crucial role for the firm. As Albert and Whetten (1985) remark, hybrid identities are typically characterized by an inherent struggle between normative and utilitarian ideals. These tensions may be an important driving force behind identity changes over time.

In addition, Albert and Adams (2002) coined the term “sustainable hybrids”. In those cases seemingly conflicting identities can become counterbalancing over time. Albert and Adams suggests three aspects that characterize such hybrids, e.g. the multiple identities are perceived to be inviolate, incompatible and

indispensable (2002, p. 35). Inviolable means that nothing about the underlying identities can be compromised, incompatible means that conflict is inevitable and indispensable means that none of the multiple identities can be eliminated (Ibid). Typically, those multiple identities can exist because the identities are not permanently aligned. Albert and Adams argue that the different facets of identity sustain the hybrid due to its functions and virtues. Thus the hybrid identity can be sustainable over time. The hybrid identity character of the firm has contributed to the identity dynamics in the MRP case, making the processes around its identity particularly interesting to explore.

This paper is based on an in-depth single case study of a media company which is family owned. Case study research is a well established and accepted way of theory building where the source can be a single case (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991) or multiple cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). For instance, one of the early works dealing with organizational identity was also conducted as a single case study (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Furthermore, this paper follows the ideas of an interpretative approach which is considered suitable and useful when researching family businesses (Nordqvist, Hall, & Melin, 2009) as well as studying organizational identity (Gioia et al., 1998). 31 interviews have been conducted within the company during two visits in 2009. The participants were members of the management board (Geschäftsführung), the advisory board, owners, journalists and other members of the management team. In addition, the in-house magazine and other internal documents were used as complementary sources. The interviews and selected articles from the in-house magazine have been analyzed with the help of NVivo 8. All material was originally in German and after the analyzing quotes were translated by the author. The coding was based on themes that evolved during the study as well as on the presented theoretical framework.

In the following parts of our paper we are first going to outline our frame of reference, focusing on the temporal dimension of organizational identity, stability and change in identity as well as the role of founders for the development of the firm. Thereafter, we present the case of MRP that we link back to theory in the following analysis and conclusions sections.

Frame of reference

Following, we introduce our theoretical framework which we use to interpret and analyze our empirical case. We draw on organizational identity as a historic phenomenon and how we position it in relation to change. Moreover, we discuss the role identity plays for the foundation of an organization. Finally, we introduce it as a processual concept.

Organizational identity as an inherently historical phenomenon

There are many arguments supporting the stance that organizations can only be understood in the context of their history (Pettigrew, 1990). Some schools of thought such as population ecology (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) or path dependence (Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009) maintain that the options for an organization's future are either fixed during its early years or that development paths are locked-in

along the way and become very difficult to reverse. Studies of organizational identity do not necessarily take such a deterministic stance (Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000). Nevertheless, the concept of organizational identity is inherently historical, as it presupposes at least a claim or a self-perceived sense of temporal continuity by organizational members (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Identity relates to sameness, including sameness over time that makes it possible to identify an organization as being the same at different points in time. This does not exclude the possibility of change, however it excludes changes that radically cut off all links to the past and make the organization unrecognizable (Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 1996).

Historians, studying identity formation and identity change on the level of nations affirm that the identity of nations typically relates to the past, deriving legitimacy, positive and negative examples as well as orientation for the future from history (Karlsson, 1999). According to (Jensen, 1997), identity formation is linked to historical consciousness, meaning that people start developing linkages between the past, the present and the future. In doing so, the interpretation of the past creates an understanding of the present and eventually expectations for the future. Reversely, history is interpreted based on how people understand their present situation and what they expect from the future. While historians see history as an important interpretive raw material for identity formation, they also acknowledge that the conceptions of history of which identity is constructed from, are often in themselves hindsight constructions (Karlsson, 1999). History conceptions may include invented traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992), or as Schulze (1987) metaphorically puts it, History becomes a quarry from where people selectively pick suitable stones that fit into their identity constructions.

Organizational identity and change

While management scholars have shorter experience than historians in exploring the linkages between history and identity, history and time have been an important topic in the organizational identity literature. The temporal dimension of organizational identity has followed the development of the concept since the seminal article by Albert and Whetten in 1985, yet the issue of stability or temporal continuity has also been one of the most disputed issues in the organizational identity literature. To Albert and Whetten, claimed temporal continuity was one of the three defining criteria, besides centrality and distinctiveness that a claim about the organization needed to fulfill in order to be considered as an identity statement. While the original Albert and Whetten definition acknowledges that this stability is relative and eventually a subjective claim made by organizational members, later interpretations of Albert and Whetten put a strong emphasis on stability. The definition is today commonly abbreviated CED, standing for central, enduring and distinctive, with enduring standing for stability, sometimes even an inability to change. Such an emphasis on identity as an inertial force is of course easy to challenge. Empirical studies show that organizational identities in fact do change (Bartunek, 1984; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996), even though this change may be initially resisted and the change process is perceived as painful by organizational members. Scholars being inspired by interpretivism or postmodernism would

even argue that organizational identity is more fluid than being an inertial force that may finally change after strong pressures from outside and fierce internal resistance (Gioia et al., 1998).

When discussing the stability of organizational identity, it is crucial to address from what perspective stability is defined. Do we claim that identity is stable in an objective sense or is it perceived as being stable in the eyes of the beholder, such as the organizational members or an external audience?

Interestingly, Albert and Whetten in their original 1985 article talk of the “claimed temporal continuity” of OI (p. 265), meaning that continuity is primarily a matter of claims members make about their organization. As Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) remark, organizations sometimes create an impression of a stable identity by revising the history they communicate to internal and external audiences. In a similar vein, Chreim (2005) notes that a stable identity is often conjured up by sticking to the same labels for describing the organization over time. However, the meaning of these labels changes. It is thus easy to maintain claims of temporal continuity, while actual changes in identity may remain unnoticed by most internal and external observers of the organization. Like political interest groups on the national level, also coalitions of managers in an organization can revise history in order to construct an identity suiting their strategic agenda. As Brunninge (2009) found, purposeful re-interpreting, highlighting and forgetting of history establishes continuities with historical events that the dominant coalition of an organization sees as suitable examples for future strategies, while discontinuities are created with historical strategies that are supposed to be avoided in the future.

Identity and the foundation of the organization

In their 1985 article, Albert and Whetten underline that issues relating to the identity of an organization are not equally salient over its life-cycle. Rather, there are specific phases, where identity questions typically appear on the agenda. One of these is the formation of the organization. During this phase, the people involved in the start-up need to define the goals, the business idea and the structure of the organization and they need to equip it with an initial resource configuration, including its technology. These choices will eventually form the foundation for how organizational members as well as external stakeholders perceive the identity of the organization and what they will expect from it in the future. By definition, a newly founded organization does not have a historical track record that can reveal what features will be considered as central, distinctive or enduring/continuous over time about it. Nevertheless as Brunninge (2005) and Whetten (2006) remark, identity claims made by the organization and its founders as well as asset commitments create expectations regarding what organizational features are supposed to characterize its identity. Such identity statements and asset commitments may already be made during the start-up preparation phase before the formal incorporation of the organization, meaning that identity formation starts before a firm is officially launched.

While traditional management literature shows relatively little interest in the foundation of firm, this is different in the entrepreneurship literature, where founders and the activities preceding firm foundation

are an important topic. For instance, entrepreneurship research has acknowledged the processual character of firm foundation. This process includes activities preceding the formal incorporation of the firm, where founders are involved in so-called gestation activities, including various preparations such as resource acquisition or the development of a business plan (Alsos & Kolvereid, 1998; Carden, Zietsma, Saporito, Matherne, & Davis, 2005). However, whereas firm foundation is a topic in entrepreneurship research, less emphasis has been put on the long-term influence of the founder and the circumstances of foundation on the development of the firm. Nelson (2003) attempts to explore the persistence of founder influence claims that by imprinting structure, strategy and culture of the organization. She argues that these imprints are often locked-in and continue having a decisive role during a long time after the foundation. Focusing on family businesses, Kelly, Athanassiou and Crittenden (2000) claim that founders are particularly influential on managers' mindsets as well as on organizational level values and goals.

Furthermore, Shepherd and Haynie (2009) have argued that entrepreneurship is related to distinctiveness which they consider to be one of the needs the entrepreneur can satisfy with being an entrepreneur. Moreover, being an entrepreneur can also help creating a feeling of belongingness. There might be multiple identities present however the focus is on the entrepreneur or the entrepreneurial identity which might lead to the dark-side of entrepreneurship. However, as Shepherd and Haynie drive forward a theoretical model it still remains to be tested empirically. Moreover, they do not touch on the link to the organization's identity.

The notion of imprinting (Boeker, 1989; Stinchcombe, 1965) addresses that the cognitive schemes of a founder or a founding team imprint organizational processes at later stages and develop into replicated patterns. Similarly to the previously cited authors, Kimberly and Bouchikhi (1995) note that apart from the creation of material conditions, the phase around the start-up is important for shaping the values of the organization. They affirm that the values of start-up firms typically are strongly influenced by the personal values of the founder. These personal values may again relate back to the experiences long before the current start-up, be it previous involvement in businesses or personal experiences from non-business contexts. Following Sarason (1972), Kimberly and Bouchikhi (1995) propose the concept of *prehistory* to capture processes before the actual foundation of the firm that yet have an impact on its identity. They include the institutional context into which the start-up is born as well as the shaping of the founder's values and ideas. Garvi (2007), examining the identities of venture capital firms, has found that young firms are characterized by founding visions, typically held by the founder or founders of the business. These founding visions provide the young firms with a sense of purpose and direction. Along the way, particularly in cases where the founder has left the firm or has lost his or her influence, the founding vision may get lost, leading to an identity crisis for the firm as the force providing it with direction and defining its characters is no longer there. Schein (2004) takes a similar life-cycle approach to the role of founders, addressing problems that may arise once ownership by founders or founding families is converted into public ownership or when founders hand over leadership to external managers.

In such situation a critical question is whether the new managers/owners want to adhere to the founder's original values and ideas or reinvent the firm.

Many firms keep the history of their foundation alive and put great emphasis on retelling the story about their foundation in various contexts, such as corporate museums (Brunninge, Helin, & Kjellander, 2009). As Foster, Suddaby and Wiebe (2009) note, having an interesting story about a strong founder who laid the foundation to future success for the firm has become an institutionalized feature of corporate histories. Some companies even invent stories of non-existent founders (Harquail, 2007). These fake stories about the foundation of the firm are supposed to contribute to the construction of an identity that provides members with a sense of direction and creates a favorable image of the company among external stakeholders.

A processual view of organizational identity

The question of the degree to which organizational identity is stable or changing will eventually have to be resolved on the level of each empirical case. We believe however, that the processes of how organizational identities are formed, developed and changed need to be understood in order to understand identity. Such an understanding cannot be obtained by snapshot pictures of identity, it rather requires a processual approach. This needs to include the entire life-cycle of the firm, starting with the situation preceding its formation and ranging until members' present expectations for future development.

Following Albert and Whetten (1985), we argue that identity on the one hand changes over time, while it on the other hand relates to previous identity – or what is perceived as previous identity. In this context the idea of continuity and discontinuity becomes important. Perceived continuity, not necessarily meaning total stability, but yet the absence of radical ruptures, implies that members perceive the identity of their organization as stable (Brunninge, 2009). Discontinuities on the other hand create experiences of identity change, including the organizational tensions that this may imply (Reger, Gustafson, Demaire, & Mullane, 1994). Brunninge (2005) proposes to conceptualize organizational identity as a process of *organizational self-understanding*. As the concept can be used as a verb as well as a noun, it allows capturing the process as well as the outcome dimension of collective self-reflection in the organization. Following this notion, we argue that members engage in interpretive processes relating to the identity of their organization. In doing so, the identity question 'Who are we?' becomes inherently intertwined with past and future related identity questions like 'Who have we been?' and 'Who will we be?' or 'Who do we want to be?'. The understanding of present identity relates to the understanding of the past (Jensen, 1997). Only by putting the understanding of the past in relation to the understanding of the present, members are able to identify continuities and discontinuities in the development of their firm. Hence, scholarly investigation of organizational identities require putting present identity in its historical context. To a certain degree this

means investigating history by carefully reconstructing history as it actually happened¹. However, even more than that it is necessary to understand how today's organizational members interpret the history of their firm, regardless of whether a professional historian would share their interpretation of the past.

The case of Mediengruppe Rheinische Post

Following we present the case starting with the license-newspapers after WWII in Germany and describing the foundation of the Rheinische Post (RP). We show the link to Christian democratic movement and present the first identity statement. Moreover, we show how one of the founders used the RP as a platform for his political agenda. Finally, we present in brief the development from a single newspaper to a multimedia group.

Newspapers in Germany after WWII

In order to start up a newspaper in occupied Germany, generally a license from the allied authorities was required. However, there were different approaches to distributing those licenses in the different occupation zones (Hüffer, 1995). While the Soviets granted licenses to organizations and political parties, the British authorities mostly gave licenses to individuals. The Americans took a third approach by licensing so-called "Gruppenzeitungen" (Group newspapers). These were run by a group of people, usually having different political backgrounds. The first licensed Gruppenzeitung in the American Zone was the "Frankfurter Rundschau" which started up August 1st, 1945 (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)). The Gruppenzeitungen were issued in various areas of the occupation zones and could sometimes be relatively small units. Moreover, the representation of different political parties in each group of licensees was part of the concept (Hüffer, 1995).

When the first attempts were made to form a Gruppenzeitung for Düsseldorf, the group represented a wide variety of political orientations. Dr. Anton Betz, Karl Arnold and Max Hildebrand von Gumppenberg all represented or were associated with the Christian Democrats (CDU), Georg Glock represented the Social Democrats (SPD) while Dr. Friedrich Vogel was liberal and Peter Waterkotte was a member of the communists (KPD). In addition Dr. Friedrich Linz, a protestant pastor was part of the group (Betz, 1963). As Hüffer (1995) notes, the group was rather unusual for the time as no publisher from the Nazi-time was included. Betz had experience from publishing newspapers during the Weimar Republic, but he had been fired by the Nazi regime. Besides representing more or less the whole political scene from far left to moderate right, all envisioned licensees were politically clear with respect to the Nazi past. The idea of having more party-oriented newspapers gained momentum and the British

¹ We are aware that the notion of 'reconstructing history as it actually happened' as such is problematic. Representations of history will always be interpretations. Yet we believe that two perspectives on history are important and need to be applied side by side in investigating history's role in organizational identity construction: on the one hand the historian's critical and systematic investigation – and on the other hand that of the organizational members as they perceive their organization's history in hindsight.

occupation forces came to the conclusion that the Gruppenzeitungen might suffer from tensions between the different, sometimes opposing interest groups (Hüffer, 1995).

The foundation of Rheinische Post

By the end of 1945, the British authorities had turned towards the idea of launching party-oriented newspapers. In Düsseldorf, they planned to issue licenses for one communist, one social democratic and one Christian democratic newspaper. For the latter, Betz was commissioned by the British to form a group of licensees (Hüwel, 1980). On October 26th, 1945, Betz, Arnold, von Gumpenberg, and Vogel together with Dr. Erich Wenderoth who had not been involved in the previous Gruppenzeitung project, applied for a license for the “Rheinische Post”. However, the British authorities were skeptical towards von Gumpenberg as he was also a civil servant in the press-office. This might have resulted in conflicts of interest and was not in line with the idea of an independent press (Betz, 1986). Consequently, von Gumpenberg was removed from the application. Vogel was previously editor-in-chief for the NRZ (Neue rheinische Zeitung) the group-newspaper preceding the RP. He became the first editor-in-chief of the new paper. Both Arnold and Wenderoth had already good relationships with the British authorities (Hüwel, 1980). Vogel left Rheinische Post relatively soon as he involved himself in the start-up of Handelsblatt, a business newspaper. From 1948, Betz, Arnold and Wenderoth alone were licensees for Rheinische Post. In parallel with the preparations for starting up the Rheinische Post, Dietrich Oppenberg formed a group of licensees for the SPD-oriented “Rhein-Echo” and Max Dahlhaus prepared the launching of a communist newspaper called “Freiheit”. When the British authorities finally issued licenses to different groups of licensees, publishers that had been active during The Nazi-time were excluded. This strict policy was considered as a surprise as there had initially been signs that former Nazis would be included in the process of rebuilding the press in post war Germany (Hüffer, 1995). However, these individuals were excluded from publishing newspapers until the end of the licensing system in 1949.



Rheinische Post and the Christian democrats

The foundation of a newspaper oriented towards Christian democratic ideas in post war Germany has to be seen against the development of the political landscape in Germany before and after the Nazi regime. The foundation of Christian democratic parties, uniting both Protestant and Catholic voters, was a development running in parallel with the foundation of Rheinische Post. Traditionally, German Catholics had a distinct political identity that became manifest in specific catholic parties and trade unions, dating back to the time of the German empire (Scholder, 1977). During the time of the empire, the catholic minority in Germany faced political pressures from the protestant majority. This contributed to the formation of parties, namely the Zentrum and the Bayerische Volkspartei (BVP) that fought for the interests of the German Catholics. As the tensions between the German Catholics and the state eased, the Catholic parties became part of the political establishment in Germany. Notably the Zentrum was part of various governments during the Weimar Republic. Still, the target group of the parties remained more or less limited to Catholics. Among these however, the Zentrum and the BVP had a very high percentage of voters. Even as Hitler's Nazis became increasingly popular in Germany, the share of voters the catholic parties could attract remained relatively stable (Scholder, 1977). The German protestants on the other hand had no tradition of having their own parties, except for the "Christlich-Sozialer Volksdienst" that existed towards the end of the Weimar Republic and only attracted few voters (Scholder, 1977). Both Zentrum and BVP dissolved themselves in 1933, a few months after the Nazis had come to power. They had previously supported Hitler in increasing his power, believing that co-operation would allow the German Catholics to establish a *modus vivendi* with the Nazis and allowing them to maintain a certain freedom of action for the church. This attempt to maintain the independence of the church by sacrificing political influence eventually proved to build on false hopes (Scholder, 1977).

When political groupings started to re-organise themselves in Germany after the lost war, it was not evident that the Catholic parties and trade unions would be re-established. The parties had discredited themselves by cooperating with the Nazis. Moreover, many politicians formerly being members of the Zentrum and the BVP believed that, considering the experience of dictatorship and terror, it was necessary to unite Christian voters across confessional border lines (Hüwel, 1980). Likewise, many former representatives of the Catholic trade unions believed that it was desirable to have a united labour movement, organizing workers regardless of their religion and their affinity for any political parties. Karl Arnold, one of the founders of Rheinische Post, was a Zentrum politician as well as a unified trade unionist. Arnold had been chairman of the Christian trade unions' confederation in Düsseldorf until the Nazis abolished the trade unions in 1933. Together with Betz and von Gumpfenberg, he was one of the key actors during the foundation of the "Christlich Demokratische Partei" (CDP) in the Northern Part of the Rhine province. In parallel, similar Christian democratic parties had been founded in other parts of occupied Germany, finally uniting themselves under the name of "Christlich Demokratische Union" (CDU). Its leader was Konrad Adenauer, a prominent Zentrum politician from the Weimar Republic.

With his unionist background, Arnold stood for the left wing of the Christian democrats. In an early manifest written in 1945 together with Betz and von Gumpenberg, Arnold emphasized that religious tolerance, social justice and an economic system based on co-determination were key issues for a Christian party (Hüwel, 1980). Towards the British authorities, Arnold advocated the expropriation of large business groups and the abolishment of monopolies. Such ideas were in line with the intentions of Britain's Labour government. They were also quite popular among German Christian democrats right after the war. However, the party soon took a stance for more economic liberalism under Adenauer. Arnold, sometimes using the concept of Christian socialism to express his ideological standpoint, remained one of the most prominent representatives of his party's socially progressive wing (Hüwel, 1980). He became the first elected mayor of Düsseldorf after the war in 1946 and the first elected prime minister of the newly founded state North Rhine-Westphalia in 1947.

The founding team of Rheinische Post had a significant overlap with the key persons behind the foundation of a Christian democratic party in Düsseldorf. The licensees also had a reputation as opponents to the Nazis during the Third Reich. Betz had been arrested several times during the Nazi regime. He was the publishing manager of the "Muenchener Neuesten Nachrichten" a newspaper in opposition to the Nazi regime. He was not allowed to work in the newspaper industry any longer and had to relocate to Düsseldorf. Arnold had been involved in opposition circles that were looking for ways to overcome the Nazi dictatorship. As Hüwel (1980) reports, Arnold and his friends were never directly involved in any attempts to overthrow the regime. However they may have been important in preparing for a democratic post war order in Germany. Also Wenderoth was considered a trustworthy opponent of the Nazis. He had supported the resistance during the Third Reich and being a lawyer, the British authorities had put him in charge of liquidating the Nazi party's fortune after the war. He described himself in his autobiography as a dedicated member of the protestant church who never joined any Nazi-organisation. Given the background of the founding team, it was a crucial question how the identity of Rheinische Post in relation to the Christian democratic party would be defined. After all, having departed from the previous Gruppenzeitung concept, the British authorities had approved of the newspaper as a Christian democratic paper and the emerging Christian democratic party had a strong interest in creating itself a platform in the media. Betz (1986) quotes from a letter sent to Anton Betz, the designated publisher, aiming at gaining influence for the CDU over Rheinische Post *"It is of utmost importance to us that the editorship is given to a man, whose attitude and performance we know well, with whom we harmonise and with whom we are in close contact...."*² Anton Betz, despite his central role in the Christian democrats, emphasized the difference between a Christian democratic orientation and being an organ of a Christian democratic party: *"In order to avoid misunderstandings from the beginning, I would like to inform you that Rheinische Post will not be an explicit party newspaper. It is rather an independent newspaper that has to be edited according to Christian democratic*

² Wir legen den größten Wert darauf, daß die Schriftleitung einem Herrn übertragen wird, den wir nach Gesinnung und Leistung genau kennen, mit dem wir harmonieren und in regster Verbindung stehen..."

principles.”³ Thus, as a licensee, Betz wanted to make clear that while standing for a political direction similar to that of the CDU, the newspaper was to be independent of the party and needed to be able to take its own stance whenever the editors believed this was necessary. According to Betz (1986), Anton Betz emphasized the importance of independence from the political parties in his talks with the British authorities. The British were also keen to make sure that the new license papers were economically independent. The conditions for Rheinische Post’s license stated that *“This license has been granted under the condition that no person that is not mentioned as financially involved in this venture in the license application, has any share of the profit of this venture, and furthermore that no financial share of the venture is reserved without approval of the military government for any person not mentioned in the application.”*⁴ (Hüffer, 1995). All in all, the intentions of the founders and the requirements from the British authorities lay the foundation for some important aspects of Rheinische Post’s identity, involving potential tensions: the newspaper was political, yet not bound to a particular party and it was a business venture, yet under clear regulations ensuring its economic independence.

The first identity statements of Rheinische Post

Eventually, on February 26th, 1946 the first issue of Rheinische Post was published and the newspaper needed to present itself to its readers. The title Rheinische Post was determined in the license document and could only be changed with the approval of the British authorities. The document furthermore clearly stated that it was forbidden to call it an official party newspaper. However, it was allowed to have a subtitle indicating a general orientation (Betz, 1986). Anton Betz and his fellow licensees agreed on the subtitle *“Zeitung fuer christliche Kultur und Politik”* (Newspaper for Christian culture and politics). According to Betz (1986), this implied that the paper would present and focus on politics and culture with special attention to Christian aspects in the areas of the churches, of art and of literature.

In the first editorial, Anton Betz provided an extended identity statement, addressing the ideological stance of the newspaper and its relation to political parties:

“Rheinische Post has assumed the right and the duty to promote the Christian democratic stance. Thus it will differentiate itself from other newspapers and align itself with the party that has set as its goal to implement Christian democratic principles. However, Rheinische Post is not a party newspaper in the previous sense of that concept. It is an independent company and aims at serving and leading based on the knowledge and experience of its editors and collaborators... In addition, Rheinische Post aims at uniting all groups that are willing to contribute to recovery and that commit themselves to Christianity and democracy... The more we promote the genuinely Christian, the more sustainably we will be able to fight

³ Damit von vornherein Irrtümer vermieden werden, möchte ich Ihnen mitteilen, daß die Rheinische Post nicht eine ausgesprochene Parteizeitung sein soll, daß sie vielmehr eine selbständige Zeitung ist und daß sie im Sinne christlich-demokratischer Grundsätze geschrieben sein muß.

⁴ Diese Lizenz ist erteilt unter den folgenden Bedingungen, daß keine Person, die nicht in diesem Gesuch als an diesem Geschäftsunternehmen finanziell interessiert eingetragen ist, irgendeinen Anteil an dem Nutzen aus dem geschäftsunternehmen erhält; ferner daß kein finanzieller Anteil an dem Geschäftsunternehmen für eine im Gesuch nicht erwähnte Person ohne ausdrückliche Erlaubnis der Militärregierung zurückbehalten wird.

the rests of the spiritual plague of Nazism... The newspaper is neither able to create bread nor employment, but it can contribute to creating the willingness that is essential for any constructive recovery work.” (Betz, 1963).

The idea of moral reconstruction and the role of Christian values were also central to an official address to the readers of Rheinische Post that Karl Arnold wrote in his role as prime minister in the first issue of the newspaper:

“We do not want to reform the outer world without simultaneously renewing the spirit and the soul.” (Hüwel, 1980).

The identity statements, on the one hand addressed the particular situation of post war Germany, mentioning the economic hardships and the need to rebuild the country both physically and morally. On the other hand it also addressed the need for being an independent newspaper as well as the political orientation to a Christian democratic ideology and to Christian values. The editorial was however relatively unspecific regarding what for instance Christian values implied. They were seen as a general cure against rests of Nazi thinking in society and a foundation to build a democratic society on. Identity statements in the first issue editorials of the local competitors the Rhein-Echo (social democratic) and the Freiheit (communist) were similar in their focus on the need for material and moral recovery, however proposing different ideological foundations for this venture (Betz, 1963).

Ten years later, as the hardships of the post war era were overcome, the two German states had been established and the democratic system in Western Germany had stabilized, a new identity statement can be identified. The three owners and publishers Betz, Arnold and Wenderoth agreed on the first editorial guidelines restating the original ideological stance, but defining the role of Rheinische Post in relation to the young federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia rather than in relation to post war recovery:

“Rheinische Post is a newspaper with a Christian democratic orientation for the urban and rural population in the Rhine and Ruhr area. It is not bound by the programme of any political party. In addition, being published in Düsseldorf the capital of the federal state, Rheinische Post has the task of particularly covering events and developments in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia with news and articles.” (Betz, 1986)

Rheinische Post as a journalistic platform for Karl Arnold

Meanwhile one of the founding licensees, Karl Arnold, had experienced a political career with ups and downs. Being the first elected prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia he had been one of the key figures in the development of the young federal state. Being engaged in social issues, he had always been interested in political consensus building with the political left, including the social democrats. Arnold had also promoted socially progressive ideas, such as the German co-determination act, granting employees influence in companies and giving them board representation in joint stock companies. As the political landscape in West Germany was developing into a bi-polar system with the CDU on the right and the SPD on the left, Arnold's ideas did not always make himself friends in his own party. There were not least ongoing tensions between Arnold and chancellor Adenauer who did not like Arnold's ideas of Christian

socialism (Hüwel, 1980). In this situation, Arnold several times used Rheinische Post as a platform to promote his political ideas. He did this not only to position himself vis-à-vis opposition from other parties, but also to support his position in relation to his opponents within the CDU. As a conflict about the formation of different coalition governments erupted between Arnold and Adenauer in 1950, Arnold published articles in Rheinische Post that countered attacks by Adenauer in an interview he had given to the newspaper Rheinischer Merkur. Rheinische Post and Rheinischer Merkur came to serve as platforms for Adenauer and Arnold in their struggle about the political direction of the CDU (Hüwel, 1980). Six years later, Arnold once again used articles in Rheinische Post in order to attack Adenauer, this time particularly addressing foreign policy issues and the relation of East and West Germany. Arnold published all in all six such articles in 1956. They were all anonymous, only signed with three stars. Arnold had agreed with the editors of the newspaper that his name would be kept secret. It was however not very difficult to conclude that he was the author (Hüwel, 1956).

From RP to MRP

A fourth owner family joined the group of owners in 1970. The Droste family. The Droste KG was printing the RP since its foundation. The Droste KG, its headquarter and its printing facilities were confiscated by the British forces and Anton Betz was appointed to administer Droste. In 1946, Anton Betz closed a renting contract for offices for the RP in the so-called 'Pressehaus' (press-house) in Düsseldorf as well as for the printing of the newspapers. The confiscated property was returned in 1946 but the newspapers were still printed at the Droste printing facilities (Betz, 1986).

During the decades after the war, Rheinische Post subsequently grew from a license newspaper to a media group that is active in four countries: Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, and the Netherlands. The first steps going beyond the original Rheinische Post were already made...



In 2007 was € 438 millions of which 2/3 was generated in Germany and 1/3 abroad. The group has nine business segments including newspapers, radio and television, real estate, new media, as well as advertising papers. The number of employees is approximately 3700 of which 1800 work in Germany the rest abroad. This is of course a tremendous development. What is interesting to see, is to what extent features of the identity that started emerging before and during the foundation process can still be identified today. What continuities and discontinuities can be identified when comparing the identity of the post-war period with that of today? How do the managers and the representatives of the owner-family of today link their understanding of the firm's identity to history and the ideas and motives the founding generation had when establishing Rheinische Post? We will look into those questions, focusing on two themes that have been potentially important to Rheinische Post and the MRP group from its beginning until today, namely the link to Christianity, and the duality arising between a normative and a utilitarian identity that is often characterizing media companies.

Roots in Christianity

The founders of Rheinische Post had their personal identities linked to Christian faith and partly, like in the case of Karl Arnold, also to Christian political movements. Arnold came from the Christian union movement and was like Betz a catholic, while their co-founder Wenderoth was a protestant. The presence of both catholics and protestants in the group of founders was however in line with Arnold's conviction that the dividing lines between different groups in society, such as the different Christian denominations, needed to be overcome in order to create a new, democratic Germany. The newspaper's link to Christianity was explicitly stated in an identity statement, i.e. the subtitle of Rheinische Post, saying that RP was a 'newspaper for Christian culture and politics'. The subtitle of Rheinische Post is still the same today, conjuring up a sense of continuity from foundation until today. On the other hand we know from organizational identity research that stability in labels, such as an identity statements, may often conceal actual change in the meaning that it ascribed to the label (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000; Chreim, 2005). While a statement is kept unchanged its meaning is reinterpreted by organizational members and thus adjusted to new needs and agendas. After all, a statement like 'newspaper for Christian culture and politics' leaves quite some room for interpretation, for instance as to what Christian culture actually is and how it is distinguished from other kinds of culture. In the original German language it also remains unclear whether the adjective Christian refers to culture only or to both culture and politics. The subtitle was slightly altered and is today "Zeitung fuer Politik und christliche Kultur" (Newspaper for politics and Christian culture). Interestingly, we found during our empirical work that the managers of MRP today do not consider the subtitle of the newspaper as a sign of stability. Rather some of them claim that the subtitle used today is not the original one. They argue that the subtitle originally used was 'newspaper for Christian politics and culture', thus being slightly reversed and putting a much stronger emphasis on the Christian character of RP's political stance than on its affinity for Christian culture. Managers we talked to believed, that the subtitle was later reversed. The reason for this was supposed to be that the claim of

standing for specifically Christian politics was seen as problematic and difficult to define and conjured up the picture of being partisan whereas the desire to present culture as one could find it in the activities of the churches was unproblematic. In an interview, the current editor-in-chief explained the subtitle saying:

“Here, however, it refers to the tradition of our title, Founded in 1946 as a licensed newspaper of people who came from the Christian, more specifically from the Catholic workforce. The subtitle was also the first “newspaper for Christian politics and culture”, and was then changed times in the 60s, to make it clear that this newspaper is nonpartisan. It should convey that we are committed to the values of the West, a Christian view of humanity, the social market economy, the public policy reason. And that is an expression of this title and that we also want to preserve a society that is democratically-paced, on the right path in social policy. And a newspaper that is dedicated to the promotion of cultural life, too. [...] cultural life is also defined as a religious life, just as a friend and patron of the arts.”

Today’s managers thus believe that a certain change in identity as well as in identity claims has occurred during the history of RP, reducing the emphasis on a political stance linked to Christianity.

As regards the link to Christianity, the founders established a relatively clear link between faith and politics, pointing at the need of a spiritual foundation for overcoming Nazism as Betz expressed it in the first editorial. Today’s third generation of owner managers thus also ascribes the link between Christianity and politics to the historical context in which it was originally made. As Karl Hans Arnold (KHA) who is the grandson of Karl Arnold puts it today: *“Christian Culture, ... is a guiding principle that we have. Christian politics and culture with the founding of the newspaper than ... after the fall of the Nazi Reich when Christianity, Christian values again appealed.”* The grandson thus puts the emphasis on the potentially less problematic claim of standing for Christian culture while explaining (or perhaps even excusing) the Christian politics claim with the specific political circumstances of the post war period.

The journalistic and the business mission

Rheinische Post was created as a license newspaper under the supervision by the British military government. For the British authorities, promoting pluralism and democracy were two important motives when granting licenses to the founders of newspapers. Not least in the early identity statements of Rheinische Post, the intention of contributing to a new democratic Germany and clear dissociation from Nazism were important features. In hindsight the ideals of promoting democracy and pluralism seem so central to the founding identity of the company that the normative identity of Rheinische Post appears as the founders’ only driving force. This becomes clear not least in the retrospective view Karl Hans Arnold takes at the work of his grandfather Karl Arnold and associates:

“The origin of the company was at that time, the reconstruction of democracy. The licensor was not thinking of a commercial company after the war in any way. The job was a reconstruction of a democracy. In the end the most then became business enterprises. Our ambition is to make good, responsible, high-quality journalism. But we are a commercial enterprise, and so

far held to make money, generating profits to ensure that the company is viable. So if we follow the economic assumptions as well as any other company.” (KHA)

This statement is interesting as the person was not born during the time and thus can only relate to it from stories within the organizational context. Moreover, it also illustrates the hybrid character as there is the normative aspect of high-quality journalism on the one hand side and the utilitarian aspect to generate profits. Following this statement one could get the impression that while the normative aspect was dominant at foundation the identity of Rheinische Post has meanwhile very much shifted towards a utilitarian one. On the other hand, also today’s managers try to link the company’s values to the foundations expressed in the subtitle. The head of organization and methods, Kurt Pfeiffer, who is working at RP since 1992 mentions by linking it to a greater context:

“Well, the newspaper itself has its subtitle, newspaper for Christian culture. So I do think that the Christian values and fundamental cultural values that we represent here in Germany that these are also editorial guidelines of the company.” (KP)

The editor-in-chief puts this heritage into perspective:

“I believe that every newspaper has a kind of genetic code and that in the ideal way really it is passed on to the new ones by those colleagues who are working there already. Everyone, of course, tries out a bit its borders, journalists in Germany know or suspect, if one goes to the Rheinische Post that some things just are not possible.”

The shift from a primarily normative to a primarily utilitarian identity, maybe with certain remnants of the original values can however be questioned. While today’s managing director who is also the grandson of one of the founders claims that there was no intention for a commercial company the literature suggests differently. In the founding license the term “Geschäftsunternehmen” (business venture) was used and the financial independence was emphasized as well (Hüffer, 1995). Nevertheless, it clearly indicates the different notions the business had to respond to. Hüffer (1995) argues that the British and American authorities were interested in that the newspaper should have a “watchdog” position towards the state which was in line with libertarian theory of the press. In order to be that a certain financial autonomy was deemed necessary. However it is also important to mention that the British and American authorities were oriented towards private ownership of the press and private persons as holders of licenses. Having this in mind, the founding identity of Rheinische Post was obviously not as normatively dominated as suggested by today’s owners and managers. The business aspect in RP’s identity was there from the beginning. One may argue that a shift in emphasis from normative to utilitarian aspects has occurred over time. The hybrid identity can however be observed over the entire history of the company.

A further indication that business aspects were important during the early years of RP can be found in the continuity of business principles over time. Economizing with resources is still today highly valued at MRP and this attitude is often motivated with references to a strategic heritage from the founders. A member of the Droste family, Felix Droste, describes parsimony as a characteristic of the group:

“This changing of great parsimony and the quest for independence gives also rise to this funding strategy of the Rheinische Post. Self-financing, minimize debt. But then, what has been saved to re-invest...”

The owner manager puts it accordingly:

“...the owner is also aware of his responsibility, otherwise the capital is gone. And knowledge of each other, if you do it correctly and faces its responsibility, I believe, may well create stability in business and a different sense of belonging, as perhaps in publicly traded companies.” (KHLA)

MRP exhibits a strong desire to remain financially independent. This is in a sense a characteristic that can be observed during the company’s entire history, beginning prior to its actual foundation with the British authorities’ emphasis on financially independent newspapers. Today, MRP sees its strong equity base as a prerequisite for its independence both businesswise and with regard to its journalistic mission. Profits are re-invested in the firm and the equity rate is supposed to remain high. This responsibility is also emphasized in the internal communication. In the in-house magazine which is published 4 times a year and is supervised by the top management the managing director Clemens Bauer states that *“our shareholders leave the major part of the money that we earn in our house, in the company and thus have enabled the large future investments of the past at all.” (CB in Pressehaus 48, 2004)*. Similarly the head of the finance department comments that *“Banks are always impressed as we have currently no outside capital.”* The owner’s investment policy is based on an equity rate that should remain at least above 50%. This logic of financial and consequently also journalistic independence is a theme that has followed MRP for more than 60 years. In the striving for independence the normative and utilitarian aspects of identity finally converge as the journalistic mission necessitates financial independence.

Discussion and conclusions

Having presented the case of RP and having elaborated on the way how today’s owners and managers refer to the firm’s early identity, we would like to summarize our findings focusing on two topics: a) the importance of pre-identity and founding identity in identity construction b) the construction of continuities and discontinuities in organizational identity when members make sense of pre-identity and founding identity.

Pre-identity and founding identity

Starting the analysis of organizational identity with the foundation of a firm can easily be misleading. Organizations usually have a pre-history (cf. Kimberly and Bouchikhi, 1995) that can be highly important to the construction of organizational identity at foundation. The identity formation process thus starts before the actual foundation of the firm and it may refer to events and processes that date back far before the founding date or even the initial idea of starting up a company. In the case of RP, the foundation of the newspaper was influenced by the historical experience from the Nazi era as well as the failed attempt

to establish and maintain a German democracy during the Weimar Republic. Both on the institutional level, represented by the British authorities, and the group of people that eventually founded Rheinische Post there was a desire to learn from the historical experience and to create a newspaper that avoided the mistakes from the past, e.g. political or religious particularism, and that was well equipped to survive as a carrier of democratic values, e.g. by being financially independent. During the actual foundation process that in a sense already started with the attempt to form a Gruppenzeitung in Düsseldorf, there was a struggle about the identity of the newspaper that had neither been formally established nor started circulation. What people would be allowed to influence the newspaper by being involved in the licensee's group? What stance would the newspaper take towards political parties like the CDU and how would the new newspaper be financed? All these questions essentially needed to be answered before the paper could actually be launched. This process of identity formation included various stakeholders, such as the British authorities and the emerging political parties that wanted to gain influence over the new German press. However, it was eventually the founders that imprinted their visions (Garvi, 2007) and values (Kimberly and Bouchikhi, 1995; Schein, 2004). This happened in a negotiating process with other stakeholders that tried to influence the identity formation process. Regarding the British authorities, the founders needed to satisfy the military government's requirement of financial independence and a licensee's group that did not carry the burden of a Nazi background. Regarding the emerging parties, the founders needed to defend their intention to start-up a politically oriented newspaper that was yet independent from political parties.

We have chosen to label the identity formation process prior to the actual foundation of a company as pre-identity, resulting in a founding identity, i.e. the organizational identity that prevailed at the actual start-up of Rheinische Post. In line with Albert and Whetten (1985) we argue that the foundation is the point in time where critical choice regarding organizational identity, such as mission, strategy and resources are locked-in. This does not mean that they are unchangeable. However, by making identity statements and by presenting the company and its products to a wide audience, the founders make a clear commitment to their choices. In the case of Rheinische Post these were for instance the stance towards the Christian democrats, the claim of standing for Christian values, as well as the definition of its initial market, being the Rhine and Ruhr area. If one applied Albert and Whetten's (1985) original definition of organizational identity in a narrow sense, one might ask whether a founding identity can actually be an organizational identity at all. How can the identity of a newly founded company be enduring and how might anyone identify a continuous development of identity over time?

We would however like to argue, that considering the pre-identity of Rheinische Post, the founding identity of the company has a history where key features of organizational identity have been constructed and negotiated with stakeholders over an extended period. There are hence continuities in the formation of RP's identity prior to its actual foundation. In addition, the identity claims made by the founders when

the newspaper was launched also include a very clear commitment that the key features of RP's identity were supposed to be more or less stable for the foreseeable future (cf. Brunninge, 2005; Whetten, 2006).

Pre-identity and founding identity in hindsight

Organizational members, making sense of their organization's identity engage in processes of self-understanding (Bunninge, 2005). These are not limited to understanding the contemporary organization. They also include the understanding of organizational history as human beings have an existential need for understanding their past (Karlsson, 1999) and the understanding of history provides a frame of reference for understanding the present and developing visions for the future (Jensen, 1997). In the MRP case, both owner-managers and externally hired managers try to relate to a historical heritage from the firm and its founders, dating back to the pre-identity and founding identity of Rheinische Post. Certain elements of the founding identity are picked up and used as examples for contemporary management, for instance the ideals of financial independence and parsimony, the claim of being rooted in Christian values and the idea of being a Christian democratic, but yet politically independent newspaper. As we know from previous research reference to history is selective (Schulze, 1987) and managers can purposefully create continuities and discontinuities with historical events in order to promote or to stop certain strategic developments. As the work of Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000), Chreim (2005) and Brunninge and Melin (2009) demonstrates, managers often conjure up a picture of continuity with the past by using historical labels that however conceal changed meanings. In the MRP case, interestingly the opposite is the case. Managers claim that a key identity statement from the time when Rheinische Post was founded has been changed in order to modernize the company. While certainly identity has changed from foundation until today and the role of Christian beliefs may play a different role in the company than it did from the beginning, it is actually not the case that Rheinische Post has changed its identity statement. It has been the same since the foundation of the company. By claiming (and probably honestly believing) that the identity statement has been modified, the managers of MRP overemphasize the ability of the newspaper to renew itself and conjure up the image of a paper adjusting its identity to a new historical context. Similarly, today's owners and managers overemphasize the normative features of Rheinische Post's founding identity, thus creating a discontinuity with modern identity that is supposed to be significantly more business oriented. A closer scrutiny however reveals that the business aspects were already very clear in the pre-identity and founding identity of the company. These two examples managers of overemphasizing identity change are an interesting complement to previous research on change in organizational identity. Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) point at cases where managers revise history in order to conceal identity change. In the MRP case, the opposite occurs. Managers actually revise history in order to make identity changes appear bigger and to create an image of a company that is flexible and carefully adjusts its identity to changing circumstances.

Overall, the managers at MRP both construct continuities and discontinuities with the firm's founding identity and the identity claims that were made early during the firm's history. By doing so, they on the

one hand create the picture of a continuous development and the newspaper and the company still being faithful to the heritage and the values of the founders. On the other hand today's managers are also eager to show that MRP is a modern company that is not stuck in old patterns, but can adapt to the requirements of the contemporary market. Identity construction thus becomes a process of self-understanding where organizational members need to interpret and recontextualize historical identity claims.

Implications and suggestions for future research

Implications for theory:

- We suggest that it is important to look into the role of pre-history when examining identity formation in companies.
- Possible to overemphasize a company's capacity to change its identity by historical revisionism.
- Need to recontextualize founding identity claims in different historical situations

Implications for practitioners:

- Managers should be aware of the heritage of organizational founders.
- Values and beliefs imprinted during foundation might lead to a lock in situation where chance becomes a complex and complicated issue.
- This might be especially relevant for organizations that are in the opinion industry.
- Editorial guidelines might not easily be changed especially when there is a distinction between editorial and the business sphere.

Future research:

- Look more into pre-identities and founding identities with a special emphasis on family firms that should have a special connection to corporate history (that is also family history)

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