

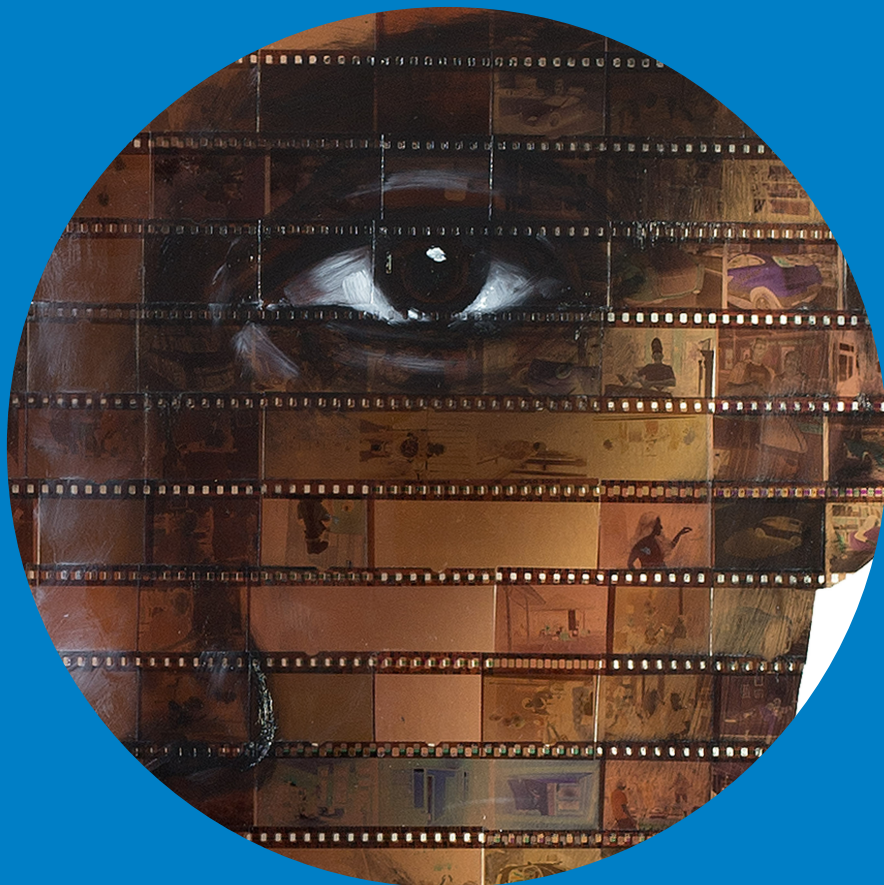
Department of Management

# Collective memory and corporate irresponsibility

A collection of essays

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Jukka Rintamäki





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Aalto University publication series

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS** 135/2016

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ISBN 978-952-60-6908-1 (printed)

ISBN 978-952-60-6909-8 (pdf)

ISSN-L 1799-4934

ISSN 1799-4934 (printed)

ISSN 1799-4942 (pdf)

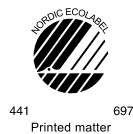
<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-60-6909-8>

Images: Cover image by Nick Gentry

Unigrafia Oy

Helsinki 2016

Finland



**Author**

Jukka Rintamäki

**Name of the doctoral dissertation**

Collective memory and corporate irresponsibility: A collection of essays

**Publisher** School of Business**Unit** Department of Management**Series** Aalto University publication series DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS 135/2016**Field of research** Business and Society**Date of the defence** 19 August 2016 **Monograph**                       **Article dissertation**                       **Essay dissertation****Abstract**

As history will tell us, corporate scandals and instances of irresponsible firm behavior have frequently occupied newspaper headlines. And while no one will deny the attention large scale corporate scandals typically receive at the outset, this attention tends to peter out relatively quickly, and in a matter of years, many such scandals are largely forgotten. Although forgetting of past events is often to be expected, in many cases it is not an automatic, inevitable outcome, but rather the result of active efforts by actors with interests.

In this dissertation, over four essays, I argue that organizations often have a tendency to attempt to influence perceptions of their own pasts – i.e. collective memory of them – particularly when it comes to instances of corporate irresponsibility, propose ways in which they go about reconfiguring their pasts, and through an empirical pilot study, demonstrate a struggle over the past of an organization that had been deemed irresponsible.

Over the course of the first two essays I conceptualize ways in which firms attempt to reconfigure the collective memory of their past acts of irresponsibility. For the third and fourth essay, I have conducted a pilot study on memory work and (perceived) past irresponsibility.

With this dissertation, I make a number of contributions, three of which are worth outlining here. By using collective memory as the primary lens through which to observe corporate irresponsibility and the pasts of organizations, I highlight the inherent unreliability of the past, as well as the fact that the past can be utilized and manipulated to serve present purposes. This poses questions to stakeholder pressure: while we can expect stakeholder pressure to keep firms in check in the short term, can we say the same about the long term? My essays indicate that stakeholder attention to corporate irresponsibility will tend to wane as time passes. As a second primary contribution, I point to the potential negative effects of forgetting of past irresponsibilities. Although forgetting may alleviate the trauma of an uncomfortable past, it may also obstruct learning from past mistakes, leading organizations (and societies) to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Finally, through the notion of organizational memory work, I demonstrate that organizations can influence public understandings of the past, and are indeed important determiners and facilitators of collective memory. Though resistance can be mounted, the amount of resources that business firms have, and their ability to focus them, means that they can be potentially very powerful drivers of collective memory.

**Keywords** Collective memory, corporate irresponsibility, memory work, mnemonic communities, organization studies**ISBN (printed)** 978-952-60-6908-1**ISBN (pdf)** 978-952-60-6909-8**ISSN-L** 1799-4934**ISSN (printed)** 1799-4934**ISSN (pdf)** 1799-4942**Location of publisher** Helsinki**Location of printing** Helsinki**Year** 2016**Pages** 208**urn** <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-60-6909-8>



**Tekijä**

Jukka Rintamäki

**Väitöskirjan nimi**

Kollektiivinen muisti ja vastuuton yritystoiminta: Kokoelma esseitä

**Julkaisija** Kauppakorkeakoulu**Yksikkö** Johtamisen laitos**Sarja** Aalto University publication series DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS 135/2016**Tutkimusala** Yritykset ja yhteiskunta**Väitöspäivä** 19.08.2016 **Monografia** **Artikkeliväitöskirja** **Esseeväitöskirja****Tiivistelmä**

Kuten kurkistamalla menneisyyteen voi todeta, yritysskandaalit ja vastuullinen yritystoiminta yleisemmin ovat jatkuvasti uutisotsikoissa. Ja vaikkei kukaan voikaan kieltää yritysskandaalien keräämää välitöntä, ajoittain laajaa ja intensiivistä huomiota, tämä huomio kuitenkin tapaa huveta melko nopeasti. Muutaman vuoden kuluessa harva edes muistaa yksittäisiä skandaaleja kovinkaan tarkkaan. Vaikka menneiden tapahtumien unohtuminen ajan mittaan ei ole sinällään mitenkään yllättävää, usein unohtuminen ei kuitenkaan ole automaattinen ja välttämätön lopputulema, vaan aktiivisten toimijoiden tietoisien työn tulosta.

Tässä neljästä esseestä koostuvassa väitöskirjassa väitän, että organisaatioilla on taipumus pyrkiä vaikuttamaan yleisiin mielikuviin niiden omista menneisyyksistään (toisin sanoen niitä koskevaan kollektiiviseen muistiin), esittelen tapoja, joilla organisaatiot pyrkivät vaikuttamaan mielikuviin omista menneisyyksistään, ja empiirisen tapaustutkimuksen kautta havainnollistan erääseen menneeseen yritykseen liittyneen (ja edelleen hieman liittyvän) muistikamppailun tämän menneisyydestä: oliko kyse vastuuttomuudesta vai jostain muusta?

Kahdessa ensimmäisessä esseessä käsitteellistän tapoja, joilla yritykset pyrkivät määrittämään omiin menneisiin vastuuttomuksiinsa liittyvän kollektiivisen muistin uudelleen. Kolmannessa ja neljännessä esseessä esittelen tapaustutkimuksen muistityöstä ja menneestä (oletetusti) vastuuttomasta yritystoiminnasta.

Tämä väitöskirja sisältää kolme pääkontribuutiota ymmärrykseemme yritysten ja yhteiskunnan välisestä vuorovaikutuksesta. Käyttämällä kollektiivisen muistin käsitettä pääasiasiallisena linssinäni vastuuttoman yritystoiminnan ja yritysten menneisyyksien havainnointiin, alleviivaan etenkin menneisyyden sisäänrakennettua epäluotettavuutta, mutta myös sen alttiutta aktiiviselle muokkaukselle palvelumaan organisaatioiden etuja nykyhetkessä. Tämä herättää kysymyksiä sidosryhmäpaineen suhteen: vaikka voimmekin olettaa sidosryhmäpaineen jossain määrin suitsivan vastuutonta yritystoimintaa nykyhetkessä, voimmeko kuitenkin olettaa sen tekevän niin pidemmällä tähtäimellä? Tässä väitöskirjassa tekemäni työ viittaa siihen, että sidosryhmien vastuuttomaan yritystoimintatapaukseen kohdistama huomio tapaa heiketä ajan myötä. Toisena pääkontribuutiona nostan esiin vastuuttomien yritystoimien unohtamisen negatiivisen puolen. Vaikka unohtaminen voikin helpottaa käsittelemään epämiellyttävästä menneisyydestä juontuvia traumoja, se helposti myös häiritsee menneistä virheistä oppimista. Näin organisaatiot (ja yhteiskunnat) toistavat samoja virheitä yhä uudelleen. Lopuksi, muistityön käsitteen kautta osoitan ja havainnollistan, kuinka organisaatiot voivat muokata mielikuvia menneestä, ja ovat siten tärkeitä kollektiivisen muistin määrittäjiä.

**Avainsanat** Kollektiivinen muisti, vastuuton yritystoiminta, muistityö, muistiyhteisöt, organisaatiotutkimus

**ISBN (painettu)** 978-952-60-6908-1**ISBN (pdf)** 978-952-60-6909-8**ISSN-L** 1799-4934**ISSN (painettu)** 1799-4934**ISSN (pdf)** 1799-4942**Julkaisupaikka** Helsinki**Painopaikka** Helsinki**Vuosi** 2016**Sivumäärä** 208**urn** <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-60-6909-8>





# Acknowledgements

As with any work of creation, the journey to the completion of this dissertation was not a solitary one; on the contrary, there are many I wish, and feel compelled to thank. I will begin with the key people involved in the completion of this doctoral thesis, and then proceed in a roughly chronological order. First, I would like to give my warmest thanks to my supervisors André Spicer and Kristiina Mäkelä. Despite his always busy schedule, André agreed to take my project under his supervision at a time when I had decided to start over entirely after 2,5 years of working on a thesis. He proved to be an excellent supervisor without whose collaboration and advice this thesis would not be what it is today, and I would not be who I am as a scholar. More than that, he has become a great friend, and is one of the most generous people I know. Kristiina Mäkelä, on the other hand, has been a pillar of support for the past few years that she has been supervising me. The flexibility, expertise, swiftness, and understanding that she has shown have been absolutely instrumental for the completion of this project. Kristiina, too, took up her supervision duties in the middle of my project.

I would also like to thank my pre-examiners Bent Meier Sørensen (Copenhagen Business School) and Bill Foster (University of Alberta) for their wonderful feedback, and timely and helpful comments that serve to significantly improve key parts of the thesis for future purposes. I feel I've been very lucky in attaining such skilled, constructive pre-examiners.

As for the general acknowledgments, I will start with the people who persuaded me into trying my luck in the academia in the first place, and who have also affected my desire to stay. Thus I will start with Antti Sihvonen, Joel Hietanen, Jukka Luoma, Henriikki Tikkanen, Henri Weijo, Ilona Mikkonen, and the rest of the Department of Marketing at Aalto University School of Business. Out of what seemed like chance to me, you practically invited me to your midst, and in my first year working in a university, showed me a lot about what it can mean to be an academic.

Next, I owe massive thanks to Anne Birgitta Pessi, who took me under her wing at a time of uncertainty and doubt, and taught me so much about passion in work, and how passion can be a guide in the academic world too. Working with Anne Birgitta also persuaded me to stay in academia; a decision, which I have not regretted since.

I would also like to acknowledge the Department of Management Aalto University School of Business, particularly the communities of Organizations and Management, and International Business. I owe very special thanks to

Minna Halme whose advice and support have kept me going time and again - thank you, Minna. I would also especially like to thank the members SUB, Sustainability Business Research (formerly CESR) for all the conversations and advice. I am also particularly grateful to the fantastic cohort of fellow doctoral students of whom many have by now defended. Maarit Laihonen, Eeva-Lotta Apajalahti, Jouni Juntunen, Markku Anttonen and the rest - you know who you are.

Aside from direct colleagues, there have been a number of people whose involvement has been crucial. My pre-examiners Ville-Pekka Sorsa and Martin Fougère more so than most. Ville-Pekka was not only directly involved in fostering the idea for this thesis, but also gave me countless pieces of advice, coauthored one of the essays, and practically enabled me to attend EGOS 2014, and then gave me excellent final comments before submitting this thesis. Martin Fougère was track chair in my first conference, and has since been involved in my journey towards finishing this book through innumerable conversations over beers, and gave excellent final comments for this thesis before submission. So I would like to thank both Ville-Pekka and Martin for not only their assistance, but also for their friendship. I would also like to reserve special thanks to Sebastien Mena and Peter Fleming for coauthoring the first essay of this thesis, the many conversations and the advice that came with them, and their friendship. Also Dan Kärreman - thanks for all the insightful and encouraging comments over the last few years, as well as your friendship. The good folks at Cass Business School and Copenhagen Business School, I hope to continue to interact with you in the future, but know that my two stints as a visiting scholar have been the most instrumental times of this journey. Finally, I would like to thank, Mika Kuisma, Arno Kourula, Bobby Banerjee, Guido Palazzo, and Asta Salmi for their involvement and support.

Last, and definitely not the least, my friends and family deserve thanks of the highest order for their support, and simply being there. My mom and dad, Kaija and Jyrki Rintamäki, and my brother, Matti Rintamäki, thanks for everything. I literally would not be here without the first two. My parents and my grandparents fed my curiosity from very early on, and surely that has had a massive impact on this outcome. Of my friends, Ilmo Jäntti, Heikki Raulo, Juh Sorvettula, and Marcus Viitamäki have perhaps been most present throughout, so an acknowledgment is in order. That particular wider group of friends has had an important role with the generally high intellectual level of conversations in general, which has served to improve my argumentation much earlier already. Thanks guys.

Lund, Sweden, 24 June 2016

Jukka Antti Olavi Rintamäki

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Introduction

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# List of Publications

This doctoral dissertation consists of a summary and of the following publications which are referred to in the text by their numerals

**1.** Mena, Sebastien; Rintamäki, Jukka; Spicer, André; Fleming, Peter. 2015. On the forgetting of corporate irresponsibility. *Academy of Management Review*, published online before print. 1930-3807. DOI: 10.5465/amr.2014.0208.

**2.** Rintamäki, Jukka; Sorsa, Ville-Pekka. Forgetting the unforgivable: Corporate irresponsibility and memory work strategies. Unpublished essay.

**3.** Rintamäki, Jukka. Manufactured memory: Memory work and resistance concerning the public past of an organization. Unpublished essay.

**4.** Rintamäki, Jukka. Contesting the legacy of a dead organization: Collective memory, legacy organizational identity, and occupational identity. Unpublished essay.

# Author's Contribution

**Publication 1:** On the forgetting of corporate irresponsibility

Research idea, contribution to literature review, selection of theoretical lenses, theoretical analysis and discussion/outcomes. Main writing responsibility together with S. Mena.

**Publication 2:** Forgetting the unforgivable: Corporate irresponsibility and memory work strategies

Project lead. Contribution to literature review, selection of theoretical lenses, theoretical analysis and discussion/outcomes. Mainly responsible for collective memory literature, and the practical application of theoretical model. Research idea mutually generated with V. Sorsa.

**Publication 3:** Manufactured memory: Memory work and resistance concerning the public past of an organization

Sole author.

**Publication 4:** Contesting the legacy of a dead organization: Collective memory, legacy organizational identity, and occupational identity

Sole author.

# 1. Introduction

*Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.*

Albert Einstein

*If narrative is constitutive of identity, an instrument of politics (i.e., rhetoric) and an expression of the culture (i.e. representation), what happens when an organization – small or large, family, social movement, or nation state – cannot tell such stories in an unproblematic fashion?*

Olick, J. 2007. The politics of regret: On collective memory and historical responsibility, p. 5.

The quotes above bring to life the underlying problems that inspired this doctoral dissertation. To address the well-known quote often attributed to Albert Einstein – but in all likelihood not really his – we seem to be living in a world where corporate irresponsibility is epidemic, even normal (Palmer, 2013; Perrow, 1984), rather than sporadic (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Fleming & Jones, 2013). Examples are plenty. Consider the automotive industry, for instance: the recent VW emission-cheating scandal is only a tip of the iceberg in the sea of misconducts and disasters within the industry. Even emission-cheating has a long, although not especially prestigious history of its own. Similar cases have been witnessed on a regular basis among a variety of actors: for instance, several heavy-duty vehicle manufacturers in the US were penalized for having installed defeat devices on their trucks in the late 90s, GM was caught having a similar system in some of its Cadillac models in the early 90s, while VW found itself in the middle of an emission-cheating scandal already in 1973. But of course the automotive industry is not a particularly special case. In the mining industry, for example, dam failures on the scale of the recent Samarco dam disaster in Brazil, causing several deaths and unspeakable environmental damages, take place at least once every two years (Ker, 2015). Not to mention the numerous instances of irresponsibility in the petroleum (e.g. the BP oil spill), chemical (e.g. the Bhopal disaster), pharmaceutical (e.g. the thalidomide horrors), and the food industries (e.g. Nestlé and the baby milk formula) – the list goes on. We are wracked by continuous corporate scandals, many of which are close copies of past mistakes, and continue to suffer from their often irreparable

consequences such as death, loss of livelihoods, permanently damaged reputations, painful individual memories, and environmental degradation.

And yet, with all the harm that large-scale instances of corporate irresponsibility cause, attention around them tends to die quite quickly after the initial outrage, and eventually the culpable firms often escape without any permanent reputational damage (although to be fair, some remain stigmatized for a long time). It is as if we – both the focal organization and we as a society – collectively forget such instances of corporate irresponsibility, no matter their severity.

Given that forgetting is the primary function of memory (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006), it comes as no surprise that such instances of corporate irresponsibility are typically forgotten. But seeing as such instances tend to be highly harmful and cause much trauma (Greve, Palmer & Pozner, 2010), it can be argued that remembering them, and thus learning from them, would in the best interest of both the society and the organization itself. In order to facilitate remembering, we need to understand how exactly such acts and events of irresponsibility by corporations are forgotten. This is the inspiration behind my first research question:

*RQ1: How are acts and events of corporate irresponsibility forgotten by the society?*

Although literature on collective memory generally states that much of (collective) remembering and forgetting occurs “automatically”, dictated by the surrounding cultural elements (Olick & Robbins, 1998), several authors highlight that forgetting and forms of remembering are often influenced by designated interests (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Fine, 2012). Similarly, several literatures in organization studies point out that firms actively attempt to influence their surroundings (Banerjee, 2008; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) as well as the perceptions their stakeholders may have of them and their activities (Vaara & Tienari, 2008) – particularly when it comes to corporate irresponsibility (Pfarrer, Decelles, Smith & Taylor, 2008; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger & Shapiro, 2012). Thus we can assume firms take an active role in the process of collective memory. This leads me to my second research question:

*RQ2: What is the role of firms in the forgetting of corporate irresponsibility, and what kinds of activities do they undertake in the process?*

This is where we arrive to the quote by Jeffrey Olick, one of the foremost contemporary authorities on collective memory. What Olick (2007, 5) is stating there is that in most cases organizations have relatively unproblematic pasts, which enables relatively uncomplicated identity-building; the stories told of the organizational past are those of heroism, hard work, improvement, and so on. But he asks, what happens when such unproblematic pasts are not available?



What sorts of stories will organizations with complicated pasts – in this case, firms that have conducted irresponsible actions – tell? How will they deal with past irresponsibility (or allegations thereof), and what kinds of tensions does this give rise to? We know already that collective memories of shared pasts involve (mnemonic) struggles – situations where there is disagreement between different actors about what happened in the past – between different parties with stakes in the proceedings, and that such struggles are rife with tensions (Misztal, 2003). At the same time, such struggles are poorly understood where organizations are concerned (Zerubavel, 1996). Following this, my third research question in this thesis is:

*RQ3: What kinds of (mnemonic) struggles are involved in configuring the collective memory of corporate irresponsibility, and what types of actors take part in such struggles?*

The final component of this research project concerns the consequences of mnemonic activity around events and acts of corporate irresponsibility, and the resulting reputations. Events and acts of corporate irresponsibility concern not only the organizations involved, but also the individuals within these organizations. Firms with a negative reputation may well tarnish the reputation of any individuals involved with the firm (Semadeni, Cannella, Fraser & Lee, 2015; Warren, 2007). Similarly, I argue, a widely shared collective memory of a firm as an irresponsible organization is likely to negatively impact the reputations of the employees of such a firm. This is particularly important for two reasons: 1) individual employees may not have anything to do with the claimed irresponsible activity and 2) collective memories are highly unreliable, and to an extent depend on who tell the most influential stories of the past (Fine, 2012, 93-94). Thus, the fourth and final research question is the following:

*RQ4: What kinds of consequences do mnemonic activities around corporate irresponsibility, and the subsequent collective memory of it, have on the employees of the implicated firm?*

In this thesis, I seek to provide answers to these questions over the course of four individual essays, one of which has been published in a peer-reviewed journal, while the rest are in earlier phases of the publication process. RQ1 guides all four essays to some extent, while the rest are more distinctly distributed. In the first essay, together with Sebastián Mena André Spicer, and Peter Fleming, I explore the processes of forgetting on the level of the society and the intentionality of forgetting by the implicated firms. In this essay we acknowledge that part of collective remembering and forgetting occurs in a way ‘automatically’, but discover that firms indeed take an active role in the process of collective memory, facilitating the forgetting of their past mistakes. We develop a model for forgetting of events of corporate irresponsibility, and introduce the concept of forgetting work – as a form of memory work, i.e. activities for influencing collective memory – to describe and explain the

facilitative activity that firms take to advance the forgetting of their past mistakes. We also acknowledge that this forgetting work by firms is only a part of a wider struggle for a collective memory of the event of corporate irresponsibility in question. Other parties also take part in the struggle, particularly actors which attempt to preserve the event in public discourse and promote harmful consequences of the event; these actors are called 'rememberers'. We note that although this kind of collective forgetting has some positive consequences such as moving on from past trauma, they are coupled with the very real risk of not learning from past mistakes and a resulting repetition of highly harmful activities.

In the second essay, I and Ville-Pekka Sorsa further examine the forgetting work that organizations conduct in order to facilitate forgetting among stakeholders. Drawing on the literature on collective memory, and with some inspiration from the studies on institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), we suggest a set of strategies and tactics of memory work that organizations have been known to engage in. Here, we further highlight the active role firms take in the collective forgetting of corporate irresponsibility and outline a selection of specific ways that firms utilize in order to advance the forgetting of their past mistakes or misdeeds, thus addressing RQ2 in particular.

For essays three and four, I conducted an empirical study of a firm that is remembered as irresponsible and incompetent, and whose legacy involved a particularly visible mnemonic struggle. In this thesis, I call this firm Upstart, as it appears a fitting name for a firm born out of the dot-com era of the turn of the millennium. The case of Upstart involves a Nordic IT start-up during the original dot-com bubble, which managed to raise a very significant amount of money, and secure exclusive global triple-A entertainment license deals, only to go bankrupt two years from its founding. A few years later, however, some of the founders of the firm released a documentary about the firm telling a very particular version of the proceedings at the company: Upstart was portrayed as a villain, as a firm most characterized by irresponsibility, incompetence, and absolute recklessness. In effect, a powerful act of forgetting work was conducted. As a result, Upstart became the face of the dot-com bubble in its home country. However, many of the former members of Upstart resisted, and attempted to thwart that story through counter-memories, but ultimately they failed due to a variety of reasons, and the version told in the documentary stuck, and in essence became the collective memory of Upstart, but partly that of the dot-com bubble as well.

Through the empirical example Upstart, in essays three and four I seek to demonstrate the mnemonic struggles that are involved in the process of collective memory and the consequences that such mnemonic activity may have on the employees involved, thus shifting the focus onto RQ's 3 and 4. In the third essay, I place specific emphasis on the mnemonic struggles around corporate irresponsibility. The struggles are particularly lively in this case, as

there is disagreement over whether irresponsibility was involved, the extent of the purported irresponsible activity, as well as the actors taking part in it. It is evident from the case of Upstart that some actors have more capacity than others to institutionalize stories of the past in the minds of the public. Others with less such capacity will have to cope with that through various means of resistance, including remaining silent and waiting for the worst to blow over. This essay highlights the fact that society-wide collective memories may be deliberately manufactured by actors with access to the right types of resources, while those affected simply have to live with that.

In the fourth essay, I place emphasis on the consequences of such mnemonic activities on individuals. More precisely, I look at the consequences that memory work and the resulted institutionalized collective memory of Upstart have had on the occupational identities of former Upstart employees. Many former Upstart employees felt their occupational identities were threatened by claims made about the legacy identity of Upstart in the documentary, and thus undertook a considerable amount of identity work and emotional work – and simply wait for more time to pass – in order to solidify their occupational identities. In other words, becoming subjected to memory work seems likely to cause different types of distress in a number of individuals involved. The narrative connecting these essays is depicted in figure 1.

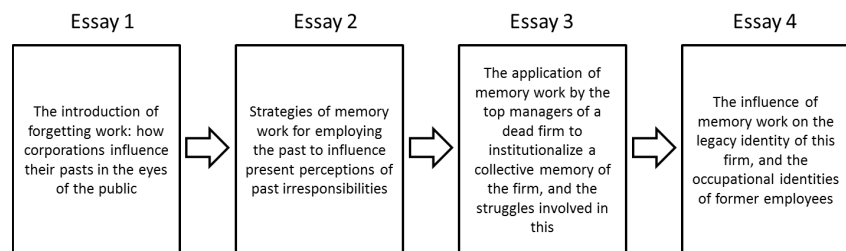


Figure 1. How the essays connect to each other.

This introductory chapter to my doctoral thesis will function as a way of setting the scene for the essays that form the basis of analysis and contributions. I will begin this chapter by giving an overview of the state of the art in the literatures on corporate irresponsibility, memory in organization studies, collective memory, and the relevant parts of identity and organizations. The purpose of this review section is to introduce the relevant literatures and concepts to the reader, as well as to lay the groundwork for presenting the contributions of the thesis. From here, I will move on to discuss my findings and their contributions to the state of the art in these memory literature, as well as our understanding of corporate irresponsibility, organizations, and society.



## **2. Corporate irresponsibility and collective memory**

### **2.1 Corporate irresponsibility**

Much of organizational research throughout history has focused on the success stories, whatever the context (Miner et al., 1996). This is largely true with the traditional literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) – the extent to which firms voluntarily take environmental and social issues into account – too, as the majority of the literature in the field deals with situations where CSR is successful, whether it is case studies of success in corporate responsibility, or analyses of the relationship of CSR and profitability (Orlitzky et al., 2003; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Porter & Kramer, 2011). But as mentioned, this tendency concerns organization studies in general. So just as we have seen a rise in interest in the dark side of the organization (Linstead, Marechal & Griffin, 2014; Vaughan, 1999) to contrast some of the rosier descriptions of life in organizations, organizational activities, and organizations in society, there is a rising interest in corporate irresponsibility – instances where firms inflict harm on their environment (Lange & Washburn, 2012).

As a flipside to the more traditional literature on CSR, the emerging literature on the dark side of CSR, corporate irresponsibility (Murphy & Schlegelmilch, 2013) has its basis in the fact that corporate irresponsibility will have negative consequences on the firm committing the irresponsibility, as well as the society and other stakeholders, such as employees. Though corporate disasters have a long and distinguished background in studies of organizations (see Palmer, 2013; Perrow, 1984), not all disasters can be attributed to irresponsibility, and not all events of irresponsibility fit the description of disasters. For instance, many events and acts of irresponsibility are financial in nature, such as the Enron scandal, or how the case of Upstart, described in essays 3 and 4, is generally perceived. Second, as Lange & Washburn (2012) note, in order for a harmful act or event to be considered that of irresponsibility, blame needs to be attributed to the party conducting it, and there needs to be some form of intentionality behind it, whether it is direct or more indirect, such as negligence or intentional ignorance of something that is known to be risky or dangerous. However, most importantly, as is indicated by the authors, attribution of irresponsibility and its intentionality are dependent on the observers. In other

words, it is enough that an act, an event, or a firm is *perceived* as irresponsible by stakeholders.

There have been some claims that corporate irresponsibility will lead to severe negative outcomes for firms, based on a few examples such as Enron and WorldCom (Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013). Others (e.g. Banerjee, 2008; Fleming & Jones, 2013; Zyglidopoulos & Fleming, 2011) maintain, however, that these examples of dire consequences for the firm conducting irresponsibility are the exception rather than the rule. Whatever the consequences for the firm may be, the negative social and environmental consequences for stakeholders are real and well documented; one only needs to take a look at the death toll in the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in Bangladesh to be convinced of this (Human Rights Watch, 2013), or the loss of pension savings by thousands of former Enron employees (BBC, 2002).

Like with much management literature, the focus in this stream of literature largely remains on the organization(s) committing irresponsible actions – what the consequences of irresponsible actions are for the firm (Sweetin, Knowles, Summey & McQueen, 2013) – rather than on the consequences such activities has for the environment and the society. These studies focus on the impact of acts of irresponsibility on firm reputation (Pfarrer, Pollock & Rindova, 2010), legitimacy (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015), regulatory issues (Pfarrer, Smith, Bartol, Khanin & Zhang, 2008), reconciliation (Pfarrer et al, 2008), stock market reactions (Godfrey, Merrill & Hansen, 2009), as well as learning from irresponsibility-related mistakes (Madsen, 2009; Madsen & Desai, 2012). Much of this literature deals with ways of managing the brand or image of the firm conducting acts of irresponsibility, while the degree to which some of the proposed responses actually manifest in the daily firm activity, and how much remains cosmetic, is difficult to verify. Indeed, such situations are dealt with both in substantive and symbolic manners (King, 2008; MacLean & Behnam, 2010).

That firms engage in management of reputation and legitimacy in connection to corporate irresponsibility already implies that firms deliberately attempt to influence their surroundings in ways favourable to them (e.g. Pfarrer et al., 2008). Indeed, that firms actively engage in influencing their environments is nothing new (Marens, 2013; Perrow, 2002; Wittneben, Okereke, Banerjee & Levy, 2012). Haley (1991) has noted that rather than passively reacting to their environmental demands, through a variety of measures such as social responsibility efforts, firms seek to actively impact the environments surrounding them. This topic has been further explored by Charles Perrow (2002), who in his masterful account of the birth of the modern corporate form recounts the highly influential role of various societal actors, capital interests especially, in the creation of the corporation as we know it. This perspective has started to receive calls for more attention from voices in both the more

traditional (Barley, 2007), and the more radical (Banerjee, 2007) corners of organization studies.

Presently, the streams of literature that mostly engage with firms as actors attempting to influence their surroundings are corporate political activity (CPA; Hillman, Keim & Schuler, 2004), political CSR (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), and critical CSR (Banerjee, 2007). While CPA mostly deals with the ways in which firms and industry associations lobby for their own interests, and in general attempt to influence their institutional environments (Scherer, Palazzo & Matten, 2014), and political CSR is chiefly concerned with the changing responsibilities between nation states, business firms, and the civil society (Mäkinen & Kourula, 2012), the primary concern in critical CSR lies with the general negative effects of corporate activity on the society and the environment, and the ways in which corporations use different sorts of power to achieve their goals (Banerjee, 2007; Fleming & Jones, 2013). Notably, critical CSR takes an explicitly critical stance towards accepted norms – ‘business as usual’ – and the stated motivations of business firms in their activities, and seeks to reveal the ‘bad’ and ‘ugly’ (cf. Banerjee, 2008) facets internal to business activity. In other words, the motivations often behind critical studies on CSR are similar to mine in this thesis. While contributing to literature on critical CSR is not central to the agenda here, the assumptions behind it, and the general approach to problems of business and society in critical CSR provide the backdrop to this thesis – particularly the assumption that firms and actors within firms will use any means necessary to achieve desired benefits.

In sum, while the nascent literature on corporate irresponsibility has achieved considerable advancement on the understanding on irresponsible corporate activity is evaluated (Sweetin et al., 2013) and attributed (Lange & Washburn, 2012) by stakeholders, the focus has still largely been on the effects on the firm. Similarly, streams of literature dealing with corporate reputation and stigma (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Pfarrer et al, 2008; Zavyalova et al., 2013) often deal with events involving corporate irresponsibility, but focus on the ways in which firms can deal with the effects such events have on the firm. Literature on critical CSR, on the other hand, explicitly points to the (negative) consequences of firm activity on a variety of stakeholders. There is, however, less understanding on how perceptions of corporate irresponsibility fluctuate over time, especially when it comes to firm reactions to attributions of irresponsibility. In other words, we have little understanding on how firms manage their (contaminated) public pasts in the long term. This is of central interest in this thesis. In order to deal with long-term perceptions of acts and events of corporate irresponsibility, and their consequences on the society, delving into the literature on collective memory is necessary.

## 2.2 Collective memory

Collective memory refers to the study of social frameworks of memory - in other words, how we remember and forget our past as parts of groups or communities. For Maurice Halbwachs, memory is about minds working together in a society; he considered memory to be not only socially mediated, but socially structured (Halbwachs, 1992, 38). Following Olick & Robbins (1998), while collective memory does not attempt to refute or undermine any individual notions of memory, the basic premise is that people – individuals that is – normally acquire most of their memories in society, as part of larger groups, and thus recall and recognize their memories as parts of groups. Memories are laced with socially shared layers of artifacts, norms, values, and beliefs, and are different depending on where they are recalled, in what connection, and with whom. Collective memory is thus a constant process of configuration and reconfiguration, and as such it never remains the same from one instant to another, but is instead in constant flux. It is worth noting that collective memory should not be confused with history, as reminded by Olick & Robbins (*ibid.*), citing a personal interview with sociologist Barry Schwartz. Rather, collective memory is shaped by history, along with commemorative symbolism and ritual. Here, Schwartz classifies collective memory as a concept that “sensitizes us to reality while encouraging us to recognize the many things we can do to reality interpretively” (Olick & Robbins, *ibid.*, 112) - in other words, collective memory exposes the socially constructed nature of (social) reality, and enables us to view our pasts critically.

Memory, of course, has been a subject of investigation for social thinkers since Antiquity (for a history of memory in society, see Gross, 2000). However, as Olick & Robbins (1998) recount, it was only in the 19th century that social perspectives to memory started attracting serious interest. Such perspectives became truly prominent in the 20th century, when sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) coined the term collective memory, and while different terms have been used at times since, synonymously or to describe subcategories, the notion has remained largely similar, and is generally traced back to Halbwachs.

According to Olick & Robbins (1998), however, even though interest in social perspectives to memory saw a rise in the 20th century, the attention remained somewhat scattered most of the century, and they were considered a curiosity rather than a mainstay in academic research. Beginning in the 80s, studies on collective memory have seen consistent increase in interest, and expansion to a growing number of fields of social study (such as studies on organization and management). Olick & Robbins (1998) cite several suggested explanations for this surge of interest in memory, such as the emergence of postmodernism, rise of multiculturalism, the fall of communism, and politics of victimization and regret to name a few. The authors contrast the rise of interest in studies on social memory with how the field of sociology has developed during the latter part of the 20th century: with the move from the study of social structures to that of practices, sociologists have expanded the notion of “culture as norms, values,



and attitudes to culture as the constitutive symbolic dimension of all social processes” (Olick & Robbins, 1998, 108).

Following this, as all different (cultural) meaning frameworks that operate as modes of explanation and legitimation have histories of their own (and may be strongly past-oriented), the increase in interest in collective memory becomes a bit more obvious. Collective memory questions about and helps to explain “the transmission, preservation, and alteration of these frameworks over time” (Olick & Robbins, 1998, 108). Through collective memory, we are in some instances able to understand social processes or events against their historical background, while in other instances to voice critique towards the legitimacy of such processes or events in light of their historical inaccuracy. As Schudson (1992, 55) has noted, at the onset of each collective memory, something happened; collective memory is about the struggle over what that ‘something’ is. This struggle, in turn, typically involves a variety of groups vying over the nature and meaning of past happenings (Zerubavel, 1996).

### **2.3 Mnemonic communities**

As Zerubavel (1996) maintains, much of the remembering we do, we do as parts of different groups, be it families, ethnic groups, nations - or indeed, organizations. In terms of collective memory, such collectives are generally referred to as mnemonic communities, and these communities may exist on several different levels, and greatly differ in size and scope, as indicated in the list above. Misztal (2003, 160) describes mnemonic communities as “groups that socialize us to what should be remembered and what should be forgotten” that also “provide the social contexts in which memories are embedded and mark the emotional tone, depth and style of our remembering”. Citing Zerubavel (1997), Misztal (*ibid.*, 12) has noted that cognitive battles over memory, or struggle for which version of an event will prevail, take place primarily between such mnemonic communities rather than individuals. Mnemonic communities “regulate how far back we should remember, which part of the past should be remembered, which events mark the beginning and which should be forced out of our story” (Misztal, *ibid.*, 15).

Much of what we remember, we have not actually experienced personally, but instead as members of different mnemonic communities (Misztal, 2003; Olick & Robbins; 1998; Zerubavel, 1996). Take the Ford Pinto debacle for example; most of us were not directly involved (or indeed, even born) with what transpired, yet, for instance, many management scholars still recall the event. Similarly, as members of a particular university we may remember a particularly painful university merger even if we were not working in the university at the time. Memories of such events are often introduced to new members of a group as an important part of familiarizing these new members with the rest of the group. Business corporations, for instance, tend to introduce new members to their

histories through formal orientations where they are initiated to the organization (De Holan & Phillips, 2004).

Mnemonic communities also tend to shift in terms of membership as well as what is remembered and how. Members of mnemonic communities may change communities for a variety of reasons; one may leave her work organization in favor a more lucrative salary or more comfortable working conditions, or one may tire of her present employer and seek something else, whatever that may be. Similarly, some members of a mnemonic community will be more actively taking part in the construction of memories than others, with the active members typically having an interest in forwarding a particular type of memory (Fine, 2012). In the context of a business firm, top management may have such an interest; for instance, in the case of Upstart, narrated in essays 3 and 4, the founders of the firm promote a very specific version of the past in order to create a desired type of collective memory of the firm. In this way, mnemonic communities may thrive, wane, or die depending on the members they consist of over time – whether they move or stay, act or remain inactive. But at the same time, it is dependent on the way particular memories are maintained. Like in the case of hotels in Cuba (De Holan & Phillips, 2004), firms typically maintain certain memories through employee training, which is illustrative of the fact that in order to be a member of a mnemonic community, one has not had to have experienced the event that gave birth to the memory. While it has been established that organizations comprise mnemonic communities as such (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Misztal, 2003), Zerubavel (1996) has observed that organizations are understudied (and important) as mnemonic communities (despite the aforementioned exception in Anteby & Molnar, *ibid.*; see also Adorasio, 2014). Like mnemonic communities in general, organizations accumulate extensive collective memories over time that are worth investigating in order to understand organizations better, especially as part of the larger system.

## **2.4 Mnemonic traces**

The way mnemonic communities struggle for and preserve memories is through mnemonic traces. Although memories are, at the end, located in the minds of individuals, the ingredients of collective memory is generally located in institutions, stories, narratives, buildings, monuments, physical locations, images, even sounds, and so on (Misztal, 2003; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Schudson, 1992; Ricoeur, 2004). These are called mnemonic traces (Olick, 1999). A mnemonic trace is a kind of a reminder of the past; it is often an instruction of sorts that helps individuals (as parts of a mnemonic communities) to understand what should be remembered and how (Spillman, 1998). Mnemonic traces are in part created by mnemonic communities (think of a history book or an obituary, for instance) to sustain a collective memory, or at times to reconfigure a collective memory (Fine, 2001), and in part generated by events and activities; an example of the latter would be oil washing up on the

shores of Central and North America after the BP oil spill. These mnemonic traces will always be inscribed with the norms and values of the mnemonic community that upholds them (even with mnemonic traces with high material consistency), and thus are never free of bias (Gross, 2000; Schudson, 1995).

Mnemonic traces have components that are both material and symbolic in nature; while Ricoeur (2004) makes a division between material and symbolic mnemonic traces, in this thesis such division brings no analytical advantage, but would rather muddle things further, because such a clear-cut division rarely exists outside of theory. Thus here I acknowledge that mnemonic traces have both material and symbolic aspects, although some traces have a stronger presence of one than the other. Maintaining a distinction between the two different aspects in mnemonic traces is mainly helpful for analysing the existing literature on collective memory and organizations, as some studies have a strong emphasis on the material-heavy traces of memory such as buildings (Decker, 2014) or museums (Nissley & Casey, 2002), while others focus on the purely immaterial, narrative mnemonic traces such as stories told by employees (Adorisio, 2014). As we note in Essay 1 (Mena et al., 2015), different types of forgetting work may be conducted on different types of mnemonic traces, depending on their material/symbolic content. In other words, mnemonic traces may be taken advantage of in order to advance the interests of certain powerful groups. But, much of the literature on collective memory emphasizes that the way in which mnemonic traces are perceived are not only dependent on the interests of some, but also on the wider cultural framework.

## **2.5 Approaches to collective memory**

Schudson (1992, 53-56) makes a distinction between what he calls an interest theory and a cultural theory of collective memory. Historian Peter Burke has noted, “Remembering the past and writing about it no longer seem the innocent activities they were once taken to be. Neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases this selection, interpretation and distortion is socially conditioned. It is not the work of individuals alone.” (Burke, 1989, cited in Schudson, 1992, 52). Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) made a similar observation earlier, and pointed out to the sometimes deliberate fabrication of rituals and monuments, while also showing how these new fabricated traces, symbolic and physical in content, also support new configurations of past events. The interest theory assumes that collective memory is largely driven by the rational interests of actors involved with the memories in question. Memory is thus guided by purposeful interests, whether they are the organized interests of totalitarian governments or the self-justified goals of any ordinary person in everyday life (Schudson, 1992, 53), or in relation to this thesis, large corporations who may attempt to exercise information control over a scandal the corporation has been mired in.

The way in which actors attempt to influence collective memories concerning the past is generally called memory work (Fogu & Kansteiner, 2006; Schwarz, 2014; Zelizer, 2008). Memory work entails attempts at influencing the process of collective memory, whether the purpose is to deinstitutionalize a collective memory of a past event or otherwise destabilize and thus modify a memory of the past to suit specific purposes, or to seek clarity of a past event by interrogating existing (hi)stories and artifacts of the past. In this thesis, such activities are distinguished into remembering work and forgetting work. The former refers to the interrogation of the past, where generally accepted versions of the pasts are never readily accepted, but rather considered issues of interpretation and interrogation (Kuhn, 2010). Here, the purpose is to shed light on the motivations behind and inconsistencies of the collective memory in question. Forgetting work, on the other hand, refers to deinstitutionalization of a collective memory, or attempts at reconfiguring memories to serve ends that are considered beneficial by whichever actors are conducting it (Mena et al, 2015). Memory work, and especially forgetting work, are key concepts in this dissertation.

As opposed to the interest theory, the cultural theory of collective memory maintains that the symbols, artifacts, norms and so on in each society form a cultural system, a framework whose main job is to tell stories that represent and reproduce that society, which means that despite any potential interests, culture constrains the ways these stories are told. Schwartz (1991) notes that this view to collective memory is perhaps the most common one, and was to a large extent supported by Halbwachs. For instance, in their study of the Israeli commemoration of the battle of Masada, Schwartz, Zerubavel & Barnett (1986), state that the selection of the rather unlikely event of Masada for commemoration was not instrumental, but rather semiotic, in that it provided meaning rather than any practical application. The authors argue that collective memory is drawn not to that which is useful but to that which is appropriate; congruent with the situation at present. (Schwartz et al., *ibid.*). Analyzing a popular poem concerning Masada against its social context, the authors posit that the myth of the battle of Masada was evoked in the 1920s by Jewish settlers in the area not because of any instrumental purpose it served, but because the myth was appealing at the time due to its congruence to the situation at the time: there was a strong sense of melancholy, as the future of the site felt uncertain, just like during the ancient battle of Masada.

Several authors have proposed a number of interpretations of collective memory that more or less attempt to reconcile the two opposed theories presented above (Fine, 2012, 93-94; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Olick, 2007, 7-8; Schudson, 1992, 52). Misztal (2003, 67-74) notes that the two approaches can be reconciled by emphasizing the limits to the power of actors seeking to influence collective memory, as the values and norms in which collective memories are rooted are so strong that they prevent many attempts at reconfiguration. The author remarks that past events limit the amount of

available interpretations of the past, as especially the importance and impact of traumatic events commit people to remember them. So in a nutshell, Misztal (ibid.) presents an approach that is more or less a reconciliation of the interest approach and the cultural approach; that collective memory is to some extent determined by powerful interests, but at the same time limited by the cultural process.

Olick (2007, 7-8) has remarked that the two independently unsatisfying options of interest and cultural theory of collective memory, whether memory is a generated in the present as a result of (powerful) interests or determined by culture and thus past events, are not a primary concern; rather, for him, the interesting pursuit is that of understanding the ways in which, and reasons for which, images of the past change or remain the same. With this thesis, my interest is similar, but with much of the focus on memory work the emphasis is on the interest approach. In other words, much of my interest lies in the way in which different actors engage in changing collective memories of past events, acts, or entities. This focus, however, does not discredit the influence of cultural forces; rather, the emphasis in interest-driven processes is a result of the research problem at hand, and the general field of organizations influencing their surroundings.

## **2.6 On remembering and forgetting**

The relationship of remembering and forgetting has always been a point of fascination among thinkers concerned with memory. Thanks to the ability to remember, past happenings – near or distant, true or imagined – can be conjured up at will. Traditionally, this ability to remember (episodic memory in particular) has been considered of utmost importance. According to historian David Gross (2000, 12-13), there are three main reasons for why episodic memory has been held in such high regard traditionally. The first reason is that events have been considered worth remembering because they hold meanings or messages that can, and should be learned from. By forgetting past events we also lose the lessons that come with them. Second, the variety of events we remember has been considered the cornerstone of experience. The larger the number and variety of events we recall is, the broader our general knowledge becomes. Third, memory does not only enable us to revisit past happenings, but also gives our lives some type of order, some type of continuity. It gives us awareness of how our life is sedimented, so to speak.

According to Gross (2000), remembering has been historically considered beneficial and has been treated with great respect, while forgetting has been vilified to some extent, even considered immoral. Since the advent of modernity, however, the appreciation of remembering has been in decline, while especially in late modernity forgetting has been gaining prestige, even becoming celebrated. Forgetting will relieve individuals of the burdens of the past, and likewise it will enable the learning of new things and thus keeping up with the

hectic pace of our times. This line of thought can be witnessed in many of the accounts on organizational memory, where remembering is often seen as a threat to learning (De Holan & Phillips, 2004; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1983; Tsang & Zahra, 2008; Ungson & Walsh, 1991)

As Brockmeier (2002) notes, forgetting and remembering cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the cultural contexts in which they reside, and more importantly, they are inextricably interrelated. Whereas traditionally several scholars have treated remembering and forgetting as each other's antitheses, many contemporary scholars treat remembering and forgetting as two sides of "a process in which we give shape to our experience, thought and imagination in terms of past, present and future" (Brockmeier, 2002, 21). Remembering past events always involves the past and the present no matter how far back one looks, as the remembering is conducted in the present. Blaschke & Schoeneborn (2007, 109) also emphasize the interrelated nature of remembering and forgetting, and go on to state that collective memory should be treated as "a highly selective process which oscillates between remembering and forgetting." Schudson (1995, 148) neatly summarizes this characteristic by noting that "a way of remembering is a way of forgetting."

## **2.7 Distinguishing organizational memory**

The relatively established literature on organizational memory (Walsh & Ungson, 1991) has been receiving increasing scholarly attention in recent years. As a concept, organizational memory is most often closely linked to the concepts of organizational knowledge and organizational learning (De Holan & Phillips, 2004; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1983; Schoeneborn et al., 2013; Spender, 1996). In their widely cited paper, Ungson & Walsh (1991) set the standard for many to come by first proposing that "organizational memory refers to stored information from an organization's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions" (61), and then elaborating that organizational memory consists of (and thus remembering is achieved through) five different 'retention bins': individuals, culture, transformations, structure, and ecology. In this way, organizational memory is in other words construed as a database into which knowledge can be stored and then retrieved at will. Furthermore, the authors conclude that organizational memory is a capability that can be utilized by the firm for purposes of profit-making. Following the work of Ungson & Walsh (1991), a similar approach to memory in organizations has been since undertaken by many scholars, working particularly with the fields of knowledge management and organizational learning (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; De Holan & Phillips, 2004; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Spender, 1996). This stream of research has generally strongly emphasized the active role organizations can take in either promoting the forgetting certain things (e.g. De Holan & Phillips, 2004) or the remembering in a particular or of specific things about the past (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011).

Although this research stream of organizational memory has made valuable contributions to understanding how organization function, in recent years, some organizational scholars have begun approaching memory in organizations through theories of collective memory. In their review article, Rowlinson, Booth, Clarke, Delahaye & Procter (2010) suggest tapping into the growing literature on social memory studies (Olick & Robbins, 1998) – in other words, organization studies would benefit from looking at the literature on collective memory. Indeed, the research stream on organizations and memory has recently seen an influx of studies that draw on studies on collective memory.

Some authors have emphasized the importance of more materially charged traces of memory in the formation and struggle over the collective memory of an organization. Decker (2014), for instance, has studied the meaning, and the shaping of the meaning of buildings for organizational life through collective memory in Ghana and Nigeria after the colonial era. Nissley & Casey (2002), on the other hand, focus more on how firms may use material aspects of memory to influence outside perceptions. The authors point out that organizations may utilize museums for determining which issues are to be remembered, and which forgotten. Similarly, Rowlinson (2002) narrates Cadbury's wilful omission of connections to slave labor from the official corporate histories and the corporate museum as an attempt to craft a certain type of (collective) memory of the firm. Here, the emphasis is on the effects that material artifacts can have on the collective memory of a firm, and how they can be utilized to tell histories of firms to the outside world as well, reconfiguring the more widely shared collective memories of the firms in question as well.

Other authors have focused on the more symbolic representations of collective memory. For instance, Adorisio (2014), drawing on theories of collective memory, treats organizational memory as a narrative, and through that conceptualization reveals ruptures and ambiguities in organizational memory, which questions the monolithic sense in which organizational memory is often depicted. Instead, collective memory of an organization (within the organization) is characterized by several different narratives which may not always be in concert with each other. Sørensen (2014), on the other hand, articulates how histories are organized through a collective instruction of how to remember certain elements of the past. The author emphasizes the way in which, for instance, narratives in a relatively minor position can be elevated into a much more significant role through careful work on symbolic traces of memory. These studies emphasize the ways in which narratives shape and can be used to shape the collective shared past of an organization.

Recently, there has been an emergent interest in utilizing theories of collective memory for better understanding other concepts used in organizational research. Anteby & Molnar (2012) demonstrate how the organizational identity of an aeronautics firm has been maintained over decades of changing institutional environments by influencing the collective memory of the past

through omitting certain inconvenient elements from the firm's 'rhetorical history' (Foster, Suddaby, Minkus & Wiebe, 2011). In such a way, scholars have also noted the close connection between collective memory and collective identity (Conway, 2003; Misztal, 2003, 132-138). Similarly, Foster and colleagues (*ibid.*) have shown that organizational identity is inherently dependent on the broader social and cultural norms around the organization, drawing connections between organizational identity, collective memory, and institutional theory.

## 2.8 Work to be done

Although investigations into firms influencing more widely shared collective memories of their actions have been rare, some authors (Nissley & Casey, 2002; Rowlinson, 2002) have looked into how the collective memory of firms held by outside actors can be influenced through material representations. Thus far, however, accounts of the use of more symbolically charged mnemonic traces for such purposes are missing. In other words, the vast majority of studies on memory work and organization focus exclusively on *within-organization* processes. This is rather problematic, given the extent of the influence organizations in general have on their surroundings (see e.g. Perrow, 1991). Similarly, although much of the literature on collective memory has specifically looked at collective memory on the level of the society, in that literature the role of the business organization has been mostly overlooked (Misztal, 2003). At the same time, the organization is relatively poorly understood as a mnemonic community (Zerubavel, 1996), so in other words we have little understanding on how business organizations function as a mnemonic community in itself, but also on how they act as parts of larger mnemonic communities – on the level of the society – in processes of collective memory.

What this means is that our understanding of the way in which business firms – and other actors with vested interests – attempt to shape the collective memories that their stakeholders have of them and their actions, is relatively poor. This is particularly problematic in the case of harmful, irresponsible activities, which cause significant, potentially irreparable trauma on the several stakeholders of the culpable firm. In order to truly understand the impacts of stakeholder perceptions of corporate irresponsibility on culpable firms, it is imperative to understand how such perceptions evolve over time. As firms are in key position for influencing stakeholder perceptions of their (irresponsible) activities, the ways in which they attempt to de/institutionalize certain perceptions and memories of perceptions, generating on understanding of such activities is of particular importance.

In connection to this point, while a considerable part of the literature on organizations and memory focuses on forgetting, much of the focus is on the positive consequences of forgetting (De Holan & Phillips, 2004; Tsang & Zahra, 2008; Ungson & Walsh, 1991). Although these positive consequences of



forgetting are on point and important, the negative consequences become particularly important in the case of harmful, irresponsible activities, as they may have serious traumatic consequences for the surrounding stakeholders, including environmental degradation, death, lost livelihoods, and stigmatized individuals.

In connection to our insufficient understanding on how organizations function as mnemonic communities, while we do know something about how organizational pasts are represented within organizations (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Nissley & Casey, 2002), we know little of the types of struggles – what kinds of struggles and how – are wrought in connection to these organizations. Certainly, as Adorisio (2014) has shown, organizations are not mnemonic communities with mutually shared pasts, but rather communities where the past may, in several cases, be contested. Understanding the types of struggles that are involved and what they entail in collective memories of organizations is crucial for understanding collective memories of organizations in general – and the way in which business firms act in connection to collective memories of their pasts.

And while some scholars have begun mapping the connection between the collective memory and organizational identity (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Foster et al., 2011), the understanding of how memory work can influence the individual, occupational identities of members of firms is to a large extent lacking. In the context of irresponsible activities this is especially meaningful, since socially problematic organizational reputations has consequences for the employees of the implicated firms – including the identities of those employees. Unraveling the connections between memory work on the collective identity of a firm and the occupational identities of the employees involved may reveal important understanding on how individuals may cope with such efforts in memory work.

It is these aforementioned areas for which I seek to provide understanding with this thesis. In the following section, I will discuss the ways in which I have conducted this thesis in order to shed light to the problems listed above.



### **3. The case, methodology, and data**

This thesis is partly conceptual, partly empirical, as two of the essays are conceptual, while the other two utilize an empirical case to capture some of the intricacies of the process of collective memory of an organization. The conceptual approach in the first two essays is necessary, because prior to this thesis, there has been very little work on how business organizations influence widely shared collective memories of themselves, as recounted in the previous section. Moreover, there has been no prior research on how collective memories of corporate irresponsibility are formed, and particularly how they become forgotten on a societal level. In order to engage in structured, disciplined empirical research on such phenomena, a theoretical basis was necessary. Only after the theoretical work in Essays 1 and 2 was I able to properly engage with Essays 3 and 4, which are essentially empirical investigations into the ways in which organizations can influence and utilize their own publicly shared pasts. I will briefly outline the structure of the essays below, and then proceed to describe the empirical case, the data, and the method of analysis.

In the first two essays colleagues and I delve into the way in which highly harmful instances of corporate irresponsibility are forgotten in the society, emphasizing the way in which business firms facilitate this forgetting. We develop frameworks for both the process of forgetting of such events of irresponsibility, and the strategies and tactics of memory work firms can engage in this process. In Essay 1 we draw on the literature concerning collective memory, studies on organizational memory, and the literature on organizational learning in order to develop the process on the forgetting of corporate irresponsibility. In Essay 2, we mainly utilize the literature on collective memory, emphasizing politics of memory, and institutional theory (institutional work in particular) to present a set of strategies and tactics to influence the way in which both the application and the logics of responsibility norms are influenced by business firms through work on collective memory. Our theorizing in these papers will be more thoroughly recounted later in this chapter in the form of essay summaries, and the entire essays are presented in Part 2 of this thesis.

While the first two essays are theoretical in nature, Essays 3 and 4 are empirical in nature, though based on a single case study, the primary aim with

them is to generate theoretical understanding. In the following subsections I will present the case, the data I generated from it, as well as the methodology of narrative analysis that I used for analysing the data.

### **3.1 The case of Upstart**

The empirical part of the thesis is based on a single-case study (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Flyvbjerg, 2006) based on interview and media data. I chose an extreme case involving (alleged) irresponsibility and forgetting work conducted by the (at the time former) top managers of the firm. Specifically, I chose a case of national level memory work on a now-bankrupt firm, the kinds of mnemonic struggles such memory work involved, and the types of consequences it has had on the former employees. Using the pseudonym Upstart, I tell the story of a Nordic IT-start up from the time of the dot-com bubble, and through it extend the theoretical understanding of forgetting work and its potential consequences for both the society and the members of the organization.

Upstart was established in the early months of the year 2000, with the dot-com bubble still running hot, with ambitious targets and sizable expectations as was typical for the time. A team of young men with a background in the film and entertainment industry had a very big idea involving IT and entertainment. They also had a plan on how to monetize this idea, and founded a firm to make this plan reality. This plan was so believable, and the charisma of the founders of such calibre that, according to insider sources, investors were practically lining up to shovel money into the firm before anything had actually been done.

This newcomer firm, Upstart, succeeded in raising an eventual sum of more than \$20 million in venture capital (and on top of that, an undisclosed sum of debt), and secured global deals so prestigious that such a feat had never been heard of in the Nordics. The firm grew from nothing to a company of more than 100 employees in just a few months, and overseas offices were established (in addition to the reportedly lush local headquarters, complete with a cinema and a recreational spa area) in Singapore, Berlin, London, and Los Angeles for instance. This way, Upstart immediately became a serious IT firm in terms of staff and premises. The firm gained international reputation quickly, to the point that Upstart begun appearing in global mainstream media; as an example, the CEO was invited for a live interview on NBC.

The firm rose rapidly within the industry, and got around to doing business very shortly after its founding; some branches of the firm even became profitable rather fast. Nevertheless, problems started arising. The hasty acquisition of personnel at the beginning resulted in a high turnover of employees, while the extremely rapid growth combined with inexperienced management meant constant changes in the way the firm was managed. Moreover, the dot-com bubble finally burst, and rumors begun circulating about a rather decadent culture at Upstart, causing further pressure from the investors

coupled with increasing critique from industry pundits. Finally, Upstart was forced into heavy layoffs and restructurings in 2001 while scrambling for another cash injection from investors, and though many firm insiders thought there was some light at the end of the tunnel after some successful business ventures, in early 2002 Upstart had to declare for bankruptcy.

Thus the dream had turned into a nightmare, and all the hard work seemed to have vanished into thin air. Employees of Upstart similarly scattered into the wind, some seeking new employment within the industry, some venturing into completely different territories. Others built on the legacy of Upstart and started their own firms. For some unfortunate victims, the recovery from the tumultuous ride took years.

Ordinarily, this would have likely been the end of the story. However, Upstart was no ordinary firm in more ways than one. In 2004, a documentary film concerning Upstart was released in cinemas on a national level, and soon after this documentary was also aired on TV, including national television, but also international broadcasters such as BBC. While there had been some whispers about a party-centered firm culture at Upstart, the documentary producers went out of their way to tell a story of irresponsibility, incompetence, and decadence. Vivid descriptions of involvement with sex, drugs, alcohol, strippers and prostitutes, shaming of business partners, and generally irresponsible, dishonest business practices were put forth in the documentary. Interestingly, the main entrepreneurs behind the documentary were former Upstart insiders, including two of the founders in key roles in the production.

The documentary turned out to be a very powerful storytelling vehicle: the narrative put forward in the documentary was quickly adopted by the media, and with it, the general public. For a time, Upstart became the national face of the dot-com bubble. What the makers of the documentary effectively did, was create a national level collective memory of a firm of which no collective memory on such a level had previously existed. Moreover, this collective memory that was created was one with which the majority of former Upstart insiders – individuals who had actually attended the narrated events – strongly disagreed with. In fact, the disagreement with the story proposed in the documentary was of such an extent that some former employees threatened parties involved with the documentary with legal measures, while one employee went on national television to debate the issue. Numerous former employees also participated in online discussions over the documentary. Struggles over the prevailing collective memory followed, as well as contestations of the legacy identity of Upstart, and through it, the occupational identities of the personnel involved. Essays 3 and 4 of this thesis deal with the way in which such a national level collective memory was manufactured by former firm insiders, the types of struggles the formation of such a collective memory entailed, and what kinds of consequences this had for the actual participants.

## 3.2 The data

### *Interview data*

As the primary data source I have conducted 17 interviews with former members of Upstart from all levels of the firm. The interviews were semi-structured and relatively informal so as to encourage the interviewees to tell their story of the firm. In order to get a thorough sample of work experiences at Upstart, I interviewed individuals from all levels of the firm, including software developers, support function personnel, producers, marketing managers, and executive management. It is not possible to provide a clean breakdown of the roles of each interviewee, as the roles of many interviewees changed several times during their tenure at Upstart. Three of the interviewees were part of top management at some point of their tenure at Upstart, two of whom were firm founders. All except for one interviewee were at the company at the time of bankruptcy, when there were approximately 50 employees at the firm. All except one were at Upstart approximately from the beginning until the end, meaning the sample is quite representative of that core group of people at the firm throughout the firm's lifespan.

The duration of the interviews varied from 60 minutes to up to 150 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted following a standard structure I had prepared beforehand, but deviations were made in each interview in terms of question order and topics of discussion. The questions concerned career autobiographies of the interviewees, their memories of Upstart, the people working there and the stories they would like to tell about it, and their reactions to and feelings about the documentary film. As themes started emerging after the first few interviews, I started emphasizing on the key questions and issues that typically yielded the most fruitful discussions – for instance, reactions to the documentary. This was done in order to capture as many nuances as possible on the key topics from all interviewees. The interviews were conducted in order to construct an understanding of the variety of the shared memories of Upstart among former employees.

### *Other data*

Secondary data consists of interviews with two people who were closely related to Upstart, media articles related to Upstart numbering more than 80 from the time of founding of the firm (2000) until the time of writing this thesis (2014-2015), autobiographical books about IT-start-ups during the dot-com bubble, online materials such as blogs, LinkedIn profiles, discussion boards and comment sections to media articles, and importantly, a documentary that was produced by a number of former members of Upstart, with notably two company founders as the producers. The purpose of the auxiliary interviews and the media material was to get a general understanding of the case, and in particular a thorough picture of the public's understanding of Upstart. The documentary, in addition to that same purpose, is an important vehicle for legacy identity work conducted by members of former firm top management,

but also comprises an especially important lens into the publicly accepted story of Upstart, given that it was the single public representation of Upstart that received the most attention.

### 3.3 Narrative analysis

For analysing the case, I utilize narrative analysis. I have chosen narrative analysis as my approach for a variety of reasons. First, as Brockmeier (2002) has stated, narrative is a crucial practice of memory, and that memory practices in fact *are* narrative practices. He goes on to cite Assmann (1992), pointing out that “narrative is articulated and dispersed through a culture’s countless discursive registers: from myth and fairy tales to literature, film, advertisement and everyday conversation” (Brockmeier, 2002, 27). Meanwhile, Schwartz (1991) has pointed out that studying collective memories of past events tends to be challenging, as it is difficult to access the consumers of images of various events, i.e. the public at large. As an alternative, he proposes engaging with the producers of said images, which is typically the media. As several authors have pointed out, mainstream media tends to be the primary mediator of collective memories, but potentially also a strong determinant (Fine; 2012; Gross, 2000). For these reasons I have put such a strong emphasis on the media data, and the documentary film in particular: they are in fact practices of collective memory.

The second reason concerns another route to accessing collective memory. While it may be difficult to access the collective memory on the level of a society, it is not quite as challenging to access the collective memory of an organization. While collective memory of an organization may reside in a variety of forms, such as buildings (Decker, 2014) or documents (Anteby & Molnar, 2012), but it can also be accessed through talking with the members of the organization (Adorisio, 2014). Indeed, many have noted the usefulness of narratives in a search for meaning (Rhodes & Brown, 2005b), while another oft-heard statement is that each event produces a plurality of stories, depending on the observer (Rhodes & Brown, 2005a). Through accessing the stories of the members of an organization that has purportedly gone bankrupt due to irresponsibility and incompetence, it is possible to gain an understanding of the collective memory of that organization as a mnemonic community.

The third reason of choosing a narrative approach is its deep connection to temporality, which is inherent in the study of collective memory. For instance, Boje (2001) has noted that in order to understand plots, one also needs to understand time and temporality. Echoing similar thoughts, Czarniawska (1997) has stressed that instead of assuming observations to be independent of time, narratives locate them in time, structuring them in a comprehensible order, thus further linking narrative approaches to collective memory. Narrative approaches also highlight the multiplicity of meanings in organizational activity (Boje, 1995; Rhodes, 2001). Therefore, through narratives, organizations can be seen as consisting of a plurality of stories rather than just one, whole reality. In

this way narratives can create competing stories, which further highlights that “knowledge about organizations is actively constructed rather than a stable entity to be explicated” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005b, 178). Again, similarly collective memory is an actively constructed (and contested), selective process with various actors influencing its formation and configuration (Olick & Robbins, 1998). This active construction and multiplicity of stories is no doubt further highlighted in a case such as Upstart, where the firm no longer exists, yet stories of it continue emerging from different parties even in its afterlife. So in brief, with a narrative approach it is possible to capture the temporality of collective memories, and identify the evolution and endurance of collective memories over time.

As is typically the generally accepted aim with narrative approaches (Rhodes & Brown, 2005b), the aim here is not to discover any general, overarching truths about Upstart and how it is remembered by its former members, but rather the different truths, the stories that people formed during their time at Upstart (and afterwards) - the lived realities of the participants in the event, or rather memories of such lived realities, which may have taken a life of their own afterwards. So perhaps it would be appropriate to say that in Essays 3 and 4, I aim to gain understanding on the afterlives of lived organizational realities.

This section has briefly covered the structure of the thesis, and shed light on the empirical case of Upstart, including the data I generated, and the methods of analysis I used. In the next section I will provide an overview of the four essays that form the core of this thesis.



## 4. Summaries of the essays

### 4.1 Essay 1: On the forgetting of corporate irresponsibility

The first essay focuses on how collective forgetting operates in connection to corporate irresponsibility events. In the paper, we address the question of why and how some events of corporate irresponsibility are forgotten.

In this essay, colleagues and I develop a conceptual model to understand the process whereby some events of corporate irresponsibility are forgotten and what the consequences are. Drawing on literature on corporate (ir)responsibility and social memory studies – studies of collective memory – we argue that a corporate irresponsibility event that is harmful, gains attention, and where blame is attributed to a firm, leads to the emergence of a stakeholder mnemonic community. This mnemonic community is made up of different actors who are bound together by a particular memory of that event. This community generates and draws on mnemonic traces in the process of keeping that collective memory relevant. These mnemonic traces consist of both symbolic and material components.

Such attempts to create and maintain that memory can be undermined through what we have called forgetting work. Forgetting work can be focused on immediate reactions to the event itself (what we call ‘manipulating’), the mnemonic community and especially ‘rememberers’ – members of mnemonic communities that are particularly active in influencing the forming collective memory – (‘silencing’) or collective mnemonic traces (‘undermining’). We argue that while some other forces are also at play when it comes to collective forgetting, forgetting work facilitates the reconfiguration of collective memory and the forgetting of a corporate irresponsibility event in the long term. This argument has a number of contributions to different literatures in management, and it opens up some lines of future research. These contributions and lines of future research are thoroughly discussed in the full essay in Part 2 of this thesis.

The model for forgetting of corporate irresponsibility events is presented in figure 2.

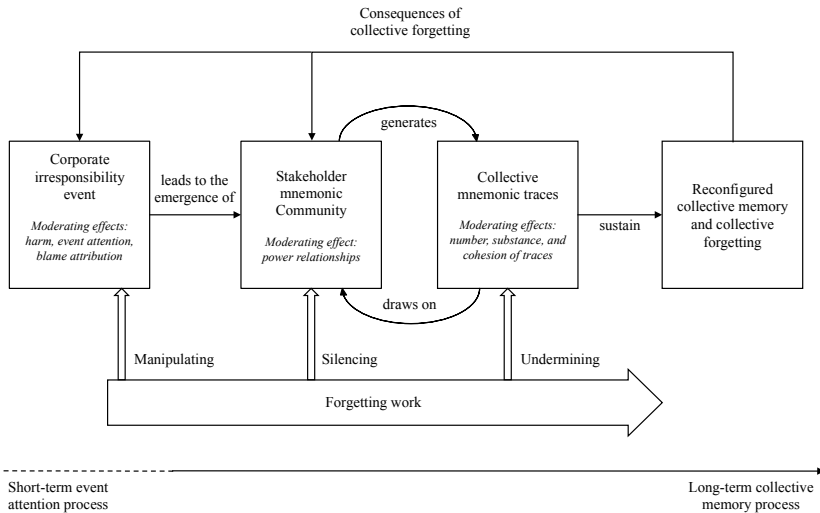


Figure 2. Collective forgetting of corporate irresponsibility.

## 4.2 Essay 2: Forgetting the unforgivable: corporate irresponsibility and memory work strategies

The second essay, another conceptual essay, also tackles the forgetting of events of corporate irresponsibility, but here, instead of the general mechanisms of forgetting, the focus is on the different mnemonic strategies of forgetting.

In this essay, drawing on the literatures on corporate irresponsibility (Lange & Washburn, 2012) and politics of collective memory (Antze & Lambek, 1996; Olick & Robbins, 1998), we contend that Iron Law of Responsibility – that corporations that misuse their power will tend to lose their license to operate (Davis, 1973) – often does not hold even in cases of irresponsibility so grievous that it can be deemed ‘unforgivable’. With unforgivable, we refer to offenses that are impossible to fully compensate, such as the loss of lives or livelihoods, persistent personal stigmas, or permanent environmental damage. We claim not only that, in connection to such unforgivable offenses, firms actively attempt to both change public perceptions of the past with their present interests in mind, and use the past in a variety of ways to influence the present, but also that there is a specific set of mnemonic strategies and tactics that firms tend to use in this pursuit. Our analysis is primarily theoretical, although we use empirical examples to illustrate the different tactics.

As the main contribution of this paper, we develop a framework (see Table 1) inspired by a framework of institutional work projects (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). From this framework we draw three main strategies of memory work: 1) (Re-)narrativization of the past, 2) Disconnecting the past from the present, and 3) (Re-)mobilizing the past. We also introduce a set of tactics specific to each type of strategy of memory work. The purpose of these strategies and tactics is to influence a) the applicability of the (shared) responsibility norms and b) the norms themselves. This way, we suggest that firms may attempt to either claim or deny responsibility for an act of irresponsibility they had committed, and alter whether or not the act should be considered irresponsible in the first place.

With the framework created in this paper we pave the way for empirical research on memory work conducted by firms, particularly in connection to events of unforgivable irresponsibility. We do this by demonstrating through a variety of empirical samples that firms indeed engage with three particular types of strategies of memory work to reconfigure collective memories of their past irresponsibility, and how they can (re)mobilize the past to help them reach their present and future targets. For future research, we suggest that broader, comprehensive empirical studies are in order for gaining better understanding on the use of memory work on corporate ir/responsibility.

<i>Memory work strategy</i>	<i>Types of institutional work projects</i>	<i>Example tactics for influencing applicability of CSR norms to individual firms</i>	<i>Example tactics for undermining CSR norms</i>
<b>(Re-)narrativizing the past</b>	Defining Constructing identities Theorizing Valourizing/demonizing Mythologizing Undermining assumptions and beliefs	Blame shifting via alternative causal descriptions or dissociation from past events Generalization of particular events (e.g. herd behaviour)	Mythologization and normalization of past norms Alternative formulations, reinterpretations or refutations of past expectations and beliefs in hindsight
<b>Disconnecting the past from present</b>	Changing normative associations Disconnecting sanctions Dissociating moral foundations Deterring	Appeal to change of mandate, formal identity (e.g. M&A) or personnel Closure of accountability processes (e.g. court processes)	Claiming social expectations or their cultural contexts outdated Controlling access to information on past events
<b>(Re-)mobilizing the past</b>	Advocacy Vesting Constructing normative networks Enabling work Policing Educating Embedding/routinizing	Relativization of events with track records (e.g. compliance) Education and embedding of ignorance/blame shifting strategies	Resurrecting past compromises and normative coalitions Internalizing external expectations as symbolic organizational or peer group values

Table 1. Discursive strategies for engaging in institutional politics of collective memory over CSR.

### 4.3 Essay 3: Manufactured memory: Memory work and resistance concerning the public past of an organization

In this empirical essay, I present the case of Upstart, which I have narrated in the previous section. The case of Upstart and its legacy is essentially an extreme instance of memory work in practice. Through the documentary, the former top managers manufactured a collective memory of Upstart, a firm that was not remembered particularly well before the publication of the film a few years after Upstart's bankruptcy. The study highlights the tensions and contestations involved in the mnemonic struggle over which version of the past will prevail,

as groups of employees attempted to thwart the telling of the story, and continue to harbor counter-memories of what happened, and what Upstart was. Former Upstart employees present different counter-memories that drastically differ from the one presented in the documentary, but eventually to little avail to change the publicly accepted collective memory.

The study reveals some resistance measures that former Upstart employees have taken up over time since the release of the documentary. Four main ways of resistance emerged from the empirical material. Two primarily active means were discovered, namely 1) taking up **legal measures** and thus working through institutions, and 2) propagating **counter-narratives** about the past. In this case, against a corporate entity and well institutionalized and networked opposition in the form of the founders with background and expertise in the film industry, such measures proved rather ineffective and daunting. Therefore many former Upstarters resorted to 3) **remaining silent**, and 4) taking distance, thus maintaining an **indifferent** stance in order to wait for the storm to blow over and the documentary, along with the manufactured firm reputation becoming forgotten.

Generally the memory work conducted by some Upstart founders through the documentary proved quite daunting for the former employees, and many felt rather powerless in front of it. There were a number of emotional consequences for some of the employees, including anxiety, grief, frustration, and anger.

In this investigation, a key takeaway is the demonstrated power of the forgetting work undertaken, and the futility of the resistance that individuals and groups with counter-memories attempted to launch. The group of founders succeeded in creating a strong, publicly recognized image of Upstart that has lasted for many years since it was imprinted. For future research, the study also points to the potential consequences such forgetting work may have, particularly in instances with graver transgressions, such as lost lives or permanent physical damage or injury. These would require extensive empirical research.

#### **4.4 Essay 4: Contesting the legacy of a dead organization: Collective memory, legacy organizational identity, and occupational identity**

The last essay in my thesis focuses on the consequences that memory work may have on individuals – particularly in terms of their occupational identities. By doing this, in this essay I draw attention to the close connection between memory and identity. Aside from collective memory, a central construct in this paper is legacy organizational identity; in other words, what remains of an organizational identity when the organization in question ceases to exist. The central phenomenon under investigation is the making of legacy organizational identity claims through memory work. This, in turn, has consequences for occupational identities of the members of said organization. The case and the data are the same as in Essay 3.

Prior work on legacy organizational identities posits that such identities essentially remain stable (Walsh & Glynn, 2008) or that at least the strongest claims remain (Gerstroem, 2015). Drawing on the literature on collective memory, I suggest that legacy organizational identity is prone to alteration, particularly through memory work. I demonstrate that it is possible that the legacy organizational identity may also fragment and alter with time, and that contestation and disidentification may persist for a long time after the death of the organization.

Such potentially stigmatizing memory work on the legacy identity of the former employer as well as the persisting contestation over what Upstart was also caused perceived threats to the occupational identities of many of the former Upstart employees. To overcome such tensions, and to protect and maintain their occupational identities, the former employees put forward alternative legacy identity claims concerning Upstart that they could identify with. This process is depicted in Figure 3.

Through the documentary – a vehicle of memory work – one group of founders of Upstart essentially made a claim for the legacy organizational identity of the firm. This legacy organizational identity claim primarily depicted the firm as best described by irresponsibility and incompetence. This claim was immediately and continues to be contested, while several other types of claims were, and continue to be made by various groups of former employees. The strong and publicly propagated legacy organizational identity claim made in the documentary has also become a beacon to which many former employees still connect their work (and organizational) identities – whether it is through opposition or in alignment. For better or worse, Upstart has thus become an inescapable anchor point for many of them.

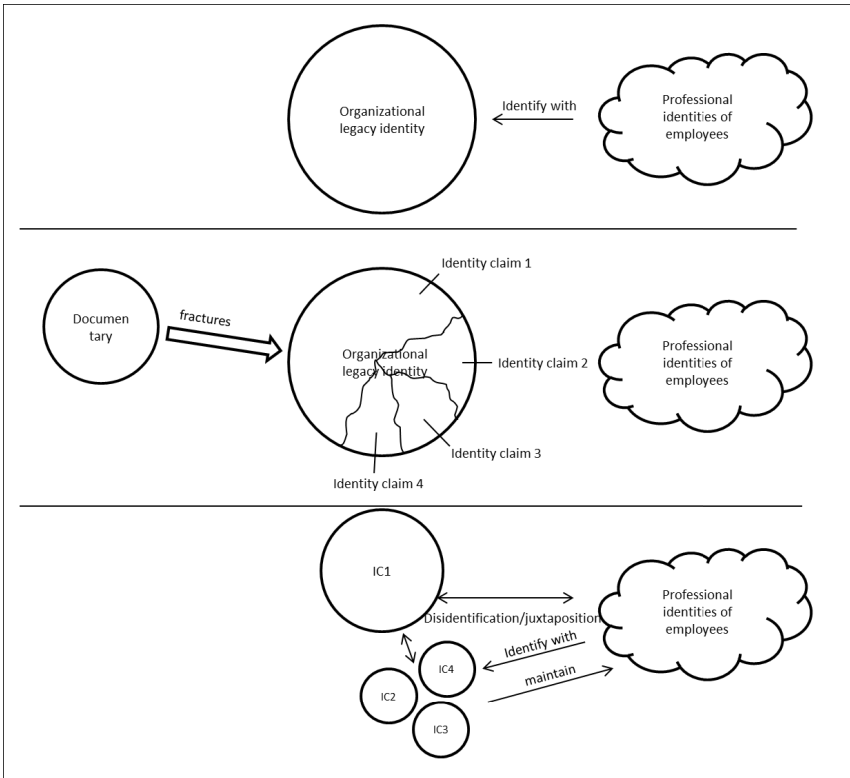


Figure 3. Fragmentation of legacy organizational identity and its interaction with work identities.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

In this introductory chapter, I have introduced the main research problems I have set out to investigate, recounted the key issues in the background literatures most pertinent to this thesis, and provided an overview of what I have done, both in terms of theoretical investigations and empirical ones. To briefly provide the gist of what my collection of essays cover, I have also included a summary of each essay. In the section concerning the background literature (section 3), I outlined a number of ‘blind spots’ that literatures on collective memory and organization studies have so far paid insufficient attention to. One of my primary aims with this thesis is to fill these gaps in the literatures (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). And yet, an even stronger motivator has been the concern over instances of corporate irresponsibility: how harmful many of them are, and particularly, how common they are, in relative terms at least. This is the concern which first guided me when I began working on this thesis.

In Essay 1, colleagues and I make a number of contributions. First, we make the claim that many events of corporate irresponsibility are forgotten by the society in the medium to long term at least, and propose a model for such forgetting. And not only that, but we contend that business firms often have an active role in this process, as facilitators of collective forgetting of their own irresponsibility. We call this facilitation *forgetting work* (outlined in the summary of Essay 1 in the previous section), which we have defined as attempts at deinstitutionalization of reconfiguration of collective memory. By doing this we highlight the need for temporal considerations for stakeholder pressure: in order to truly understand how stakeholders evaluate corporate irresponsibility, one needs to comprehend how instances of corporate irresponsibility are evaluated over time. This is, in effect, what understanding the process of collective memory of an event of corporate irresponsibility brings to the table. This is what I, with colleagues, have provided the first steps for in Essay 1.

As I note throughout the thesis, forgetting work is a sub-category of memory work, which entails all sorts of active attempts at influencing the process of collective memory. In Essay 2 a colleague and I take the theme of organizational memory work further by highlighting the different mnemonic strategies and tactics that firms have been known to undertake in the past. Specifically, we point to the fact that such memory work is one way in which firms work towards enacting institutional changes on what is expected of them by the society.

Business firms use the past to determine whether or not they can be blamed for their irresponsible activities, but also whether they can be considered irresponsible in the first place. This way, depending on the situation, firms may attempt to influence memory in order to avoid having to take responsibility of a past mistake, but they may also use the past as a resource to question whether or not a past activity can be considered irresponsible at all.

Another point is that, although much work on memory and organizations focuses on the positive aspects of forgetting (e.g. De Holan & Phillips, 2004), a very serious potential negative consequence of forgetting of corporate irresponsibility is the failure to learn from them, both on the level of the organization and the society. This forgetting may well lead to organizations repeating them. This, in turn, will only lead to suffering and trauma for all – trauma, which could arguably be prevented by taking heed of past mistakes (Fine, 2012). In short, forgetting has some potentially highly negative consequences in contexts where (business) organizations are involved. This is a very serious issue that I hope this thesis will inspire further discussion on.

The notion of memory work leads us to another contribution this thesis makes, which concerns the notion of memory and organizations: (public) collective memory has wide implications for firms, and importantly, firms have wide implications for (public) collective memory. On the one hand, studies on organizations and memory have almost exclusively focused on a within-firm perspective of memory (Rowlinson et al., 2010): either issues of organizational memory (Walsh & Ungson, 1991), or of the consequences of outside memory processes to the organization (Rowlinson, 2002). On the other hand, the literature on collective memory has dedicated much attention to mnemonic processes in society, particularly when it comes to political issues (e.g. Fine, 2012). At the same time, attention to the role of organizations has largely been missing (Zerubavel, 1996). With this thesis, I contribute to studies on organizations and memory by pointing attention how organizational mnemonic activities have influence over the wider society. Through the concepts of memory work, and forgetting work in particular, I highlight the very active role business organizations can take in the mnemonic processes going on in the wider society. This contributes to a wider understanding of the ways and extent to which firms influence their surroundings, and thus a more comprehensive understanding of business-society relations.

In Essays 3 and 4 I point out that not only does this business firm influence on publicly shared collective memory affect the wider society and the organization itself, but also on a variety in individuals. In the case of Upstart, the employees of the firm felt serious emotional repercussions after the heavy memory work conducted by former top management through the documentary film. But these consequences were not only emotional, but the stigmatization caused by the documentary impacted professional reputations, and as I point out in Essay 4, their occupational identities. Such serious effects has required a



considerable amount of labor – identity, and otherwise – from former Upstarters. While such negative consequences of organizational memory work are noteworthy in their own right, there is a minor point to make concerning the point of view of organization studies as well. Upstart is likely not the only case where the employees of the organization are the primary group of individuals affected by organizational memory work, and those employees will in most cases become members other organizations. In addition to their skill and expertise, their emotional lives and identities will also have an effect on their performance as members of these organizations, which highlights the need for understanding the consequences of organizational memory work on their employees.

Although memory work may have impacts on individual employees, it may still be resisted – as pointed out in the literature on collective memory, the process of collective memory typically entails struggle (Fine, 2012; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Such is the case when a single organization is concerned, as I demonstrate with the case of Upstart. I discover four distinct ways of resisting memory work: legal measures, counter-narratives, silence, and indifference. It turns out that against a more powerful ‘memory entrepreneur’ (to borrow a term from Gary Alan Fine, 2012), remaining silent, or keeping an indifferent distance are the more viable options, as with them one can rely on the process of forgetting to resolve the issue sooner or later. This helps understand the ways in which work communities cope with contested pasts, but also helps members of work communities cope with memory work conducted by or against their employer. With this, I also make a contribution to the literature on collective memory by conducting a study on an organization as a mnemonic community (Zerubavel, 1996). Understanding how organizations function, and the role they play as mnemonic communities is especially important considering the role organizations play in today’s society (Perrow, 1991).

Finally, in Essay 4 I consider the consequences of memory work on (former) employees of an organization. Specifically, I investigate the consequences of that memory work has on their occupational identities, as in the case of Upstart, the legacy identity of the organization was fractured with stigmatizing memory work by former top management. This, in turn, caused severe strain on the occupational identities of Upstart’s former employees. Although Anteby and Molnar (2012) have already shown a valuable connection between collective memory and organizational identity, little is understood of the connections between collective memory and occupational identity – particularly on how memory work concerning an organization has impacts on the occupational identities of its employees. With this essay, I provide the first steps in understanding this relationship.

#### *Implications for future research*

I acknowledge that this thesis is but a step in covering the relationship between collective memory, but especially memory work, organizations, and questions of corporate (ir)responsibility. With this thesis I have laid the groundwork for

that through the conceptualization of forgetting work concerning corporate irresponsibility, and investigated memory work – in the form of allegations of irresponsibility – on the collective memory of an already dead organization. Plenty of work remains to be done. The next step involves deep empirical investigations of large scale corporate irresponsibility.

One effective way of gaining understanding on memory work and corporate irresponsibility would be an extensive longitudinal single case study on a large-scale event of corporate irresponsibility, focusing on organizational archival records and media archives. Such an investigation could reveal the deeper mechanisms of the process of collective memory in connection to corporate irresponsibility, and in particular the ways in which different actors conflict and interact in the mnemonic struggle (Zerubavel, 1996) that is inherent to the process.

Another empirical study would be a comparative case study – possibly qualitative comparative analysis (QCA; Ragin, 1987) – in which several cases of corporate irresponsibility with a similar profile would be compared, with the difference in outcome being whether or not the case has become forgotten. Such a study could reveal crucial factors in the mechanism that leads to forgetting or remembering of events of corporate irresponsibility.

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# Publication 1

**Mena, Sebastien; Rintamäki, Jukka; Spicer, André; & Fleming, Peter. On the forgetting of corporate irresponsibility. Academy of Management Review, published online before print, doi: 10.5465/amr.2014.0208, 2015.**

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## **ON THE FORGETTING OF CORPORATE IRRESPONSIBILITY**

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### **Acknowledgments**

We thank Editor Paul Godfrey for his outstanding guidance and three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. We also thank Daisy Chung, Santi Furnari, Emilio Marti and Amit Nigam for helpful comments on previous versions of the manuscript, as well as participants at the OTREG meeting in Cambridge on October 10, 2014, and our colleagues at Cass Business School who provided useful advice in a brownbag seminar.

## ON THE FORGETTING OF CORPORATE IRRESPONSIBILITY

### **Abstract**

Why are some serious cases of corporate irresponsibility collectively forgotten? Drawing on social memory studies, we examine how this collective forgetting process can occur. We propose that a major instance of corporate irresponsibility leads to the emergence of a stakeholder mnemonic community that shares a common recollection of the past incident. This community generates and then draws upon mnemonic traces to sustain a collective memory of the past event over time. In addition to the natural entropic tendencies toward forgetting, collective memory is also undermined by instrumental ‘forgetting work’, which we conceptualize in this paper. Forgetting work involves manipulating short-term conditions of the event, silencing vocal ‘rememberers’ and undermining collective mnemonic traces that sustain a version of the past. This process can result in a reconfigured collective memory and collective forgetting of corporate irresponsibility events. Collective forgetting can have positive and negative consequences for the firm, stakeholders and society.

### **Keywords**

corporate irresponsibility, collective memory, forgetting, forgetting work, organizational memory, social memory studies

Some instances of corporate irresponsibility such as Nestlé’s marketing of baby formula in developing countries, Nike’s use of child labor and Enron’s fraudulent accounting practices remain at the forefront of our collective memory to this day. Other such cases, however, have largely been forgotten. Take the example of HealthSouth, one of the largest and most well-respected rehabilitation hospitals in the United States. In 2003, the firm was embroiled in a serious and widely publicized accounting scandal when then CEO, Richard Scrushy, was accused of inflating profits by US\$1.4 billion. At the time, many considered the firm to be a lost cause as it approached bankruptcy. Today, however, its past woes seem to have almost been forgotten. The organization renewed its focus on its core capabilities, relisted on the stock exchange and completely rebuilt its reputation (Goodman, 2003).

The process of forgetting HealthSouth’s irresponsible past appears to have been actively managed, at least in part. After Scrushy departed and “as part of its effort to rebuild the brand’s credibility, the new management removed all traces of Scrushy from corporate headquarters and the company website” (Goodman, 2003). Scrushy’s name and his corporate message were erased from the conference center at HealthSouth headquarters. The company store and museum were closed and the executive offices were opened to all employees who were previously barred from this area under Scrushy (Goodman, 2003). The example indicates that while acts of corporate irresponsibility can be ‘naturally’ forgotten over time, forgetting can also result from active and instrumental work. This paper conceptualizes this instrumental work and how it might facilitate the collective forgetting of corporate irresponsibility events.

Corporate irresponsibility events are temporally defined organizational action(s) that cause harm to stakeholders. Current research has focused primarily on the questions of how organizations and their stakeholders react to such traumatic events in the short term (e.g. Barnett, 2014; Bundy, Shropshire, & Buchholtz, 2013; Godfrey, Merrill, & Hansen, 2009;

Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003). We know less about how corporate irresponsibility events can be collectively forgotten over longer periods of time. Some research does address forgetting in and around organizations. Investigations of organizational learning and memory (Levitt & March, 1988; Walsh & Ungson, 1991) find that organizational knowledge can be forgotten (e.g. Brunsson, 2009; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Hedberg, 1981). There is also a social constructionist approach to memory in organizations (see e.g. Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Coraiola, Foster, & Suddaby, 2015; Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010; Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004) that examines how organizations strategically manage the past for present ends and, in the process, forget certain past events (e.g. Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, & Wiebe, 2011; Suddaby, Foster, & Trank, 2010). This research, however, focuses in large part on intra-organizational mnemonic processes. In the few studies of remembering and forgetting at a supra-organizational level, attention is devoted to mnemonic interactions between competitors (e.g. Greve, 2005; Madsen, 2009). As our paper will demonstrate, however, the collective forgetting of corporate irresponsibility involves other significant stakeholders, including employees, consumers, civil society organizations, the state or the media. To understand this process, we require a model that accounts for remembering and forgetting on the part of internal and external stakeholders. This is critical because wider stakeholder groups play a vital role in holding firms accountable for past corporate irresponsibility events and ultimately improving their social performance (Lange & Washburn, 2012).

To better explain how a corporate irresponsibility event can be forgotten by a community of stakeholders, we turn to social memory studies (for a review, see Olick & Robbins, 1998). Specifically, we build on the concept of collective memory, which examines the ways in which a community may perceive and reconstruct the past to meet its present

needs (Halbwachs, 1992). Though our context is admittedly unique since “disasters are inherently memorable” (Madsen, 2009: 873), many instances of corporate irresponsibility are nevertheless forgotten (e.g. Cooke, 2003; Crane, 2013; Fig, 2005). Social memory studies are useful in this regard. They acknowledge that collective forgetting may result from natural inertia, but highlight the fact that it can also be hastened by the instrumental activity of interested actors (Fine, 2012; Olick, 2007; Schudson, 1995). By developing this insight, we argue that ‘forgetting work’ is undertaken by actors with an interest in the collective forgetting of a past corporate irresponsibility event. We propose that forgetting work unfolds over time. In the short term, actors can *manipulate* the initial collective memory of a serious incident, for example, by attempting to influence how the media reports on it. In the longer run, actors can *silence* stakeholders, especially vocal ones who seek to sustain the remembrance of the event. Over time, firms can *undermine* the collective mnemonic traces of the past event by fabricating or destroying evidence, for example. When forgetting work is successful, the collective memory of the past event is reconfigured, eventually leading to its being collectively forgotten. This may have positive organizational consequences, such as maintenance of the firm’s identity and legitimacy among stakeholders (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Brown & Starkey, 2000), but also negative ones, such as a failure to learn from past mistakes (Madsen, 2009) and the increased likelihood of a similar event happening again (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011).

By positing this argument, we aim to make several contributions to organization and management science. First, we provide an account of corporate irresponsibility that extends beyond the immediate reactions to wrongdoing exhibited by firms and stakeholders (e.g. Barnett, 2014; Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Bundy et al., 2013; Waldron, Navis, & Fisher, 2013). Our paper considers longer-term mnemonic processes. And given that social constructionist approaches tend to focus on the positive features of organizational memory and forgetting



(e.g. Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Suddaby et al., 2010), we reveal a darker side of mnemonic processes in which past transgressions that ought to be remembered are forgotten (e.g. Booth, Clark, Delahaye, Procter, & Rowlinson, 2007). Finally, we contribute to studies of organizational memory and learning (e.g. Darr, Argote, & Epple, 1995; Madsen, 2009) by drawing attention to the importance of a wider community of stakeholders engaged in mnemonic activity.

The paper is structured as follows. First we review the organizational learning and memory literature before examining the contribution that social memory studies make to conceptualizing collective memory and forgetting. Our model is then developed by discussing corporate irresponsibility events in relation to harm, attention and blame attribution. We explain how mnemonic communities and traces emerge from such events. The paper then focuses on the notion of forgetting work and its consequences for collective memory. And finally, in the discussion section, we posit various moderating effects, limitations and avenues for future research in management and organization studies.

## **MEMORY AND FORGETTING**

### **Organizational Learning and Memory**

Memory has been studied for some time by organization and management scholars, especially in connection to knowledge management and organizational learning (Cyert & March, 1963; Levitt & March, 1988). Researchers have examined how organizations learn by doing in order to improve their production processes (Argote, 2012; Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999; Fiol & Lyles, 1985). They have found that organizations embed past knowledge in their ‘organizational memory’ that is stored in and retrieved from ‘retention bins’ (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). One of these retention bins is employees, who do the learning for their organization and encode it into other retention bins such as the organization’s culture, routines

and structure (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; March & Olsen, 1975; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Top management can assist employees in encoding the knowledge they generate by facilitating communication and knowledge transfer (Crossan et al., 1999; Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

Relatively less attention has been given to knowledge depreciation (e.g. Darr et al., 1995; Madsen, 2009), unlearning (e.g. Hedberg, 1981; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984) and forgetting (e.g. de Holan & Phillips, 2004; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011). Forgetfulness occurs when knowledge, even that which is embedded in organizational memory, is lost over time (Darr et al., 1995). This is typically due to employee turnover (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011; Levitt & March, 1988), loss or destruction of archival records, knowledge obsolescence (Argote, 2012) and organizational reform (Brunsson, 2009). This loss of knowledge may or may not be intentional (de Holan & Phillips, 2004). When it is intentional, it is often assumed to be beneficial in terms of firm performance (Hedberg, 1981; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984).

While the learning literature has advanced our understanding of mnemonic processes within organizations, it has said less about supra-organizational, collective forgetting. Other studies have examined forgetting beyond the boundaries of a single firm (e.g. Argote, Beckman, & Epple, 1990; Darr et al., 1995). Madsen (2009), for example, investigated how US coal mining firms forget accidents involving other firms in the industry. He found that while large-scale mining disasters remain in the 'memory' of the population of mining firms and to some extent prevent the occurrence of future accidents on other sites, smaller accidents are much more quickly forgotten. Similarly, Desai (2014b) reveals how negative media coverage of US railroad accidents at other railroad firms can concentrate organizational attention and facilitate the implementation of safety measures, whereas the lack of such additional information does not – thus leading to a failure to learn from the mistakes of others.

The vast majority of this research on inter-organizational learning focuses on efficiency and competitive dynamics within and between firms (Argote, 2012). As a result, it often does not consider memories held by stakeholders (such as civil society organizations, governments or local communities) who are not competing firms. These other stakeholders matter because they can help to hold firms accountable for their activities (Lange & Washburn, 2012). Indeed, some stakeholders can play a central role in maintaining memories of past traumatic events, reminding others of corporate wrongdoing and putting pressure on other firms not to make similar mistakes (Pfarrer, Decelles, Smith, & Taylor, 2008). To help us consider the role that these stakeholders play in mnemonic processes, we now turn to social memory studies.

### **Social Memory Studies**

Social memory studies investigate the mnemonic processes we collectively use when remembering and forgetting. The central question addressed by this body of research concerns the way in which past events are socially reconstructed in light of current beliefs and norms to serve the present purposes of a community (Gross, 2000; Olick, 1999; Olick & Robbins, 1998). This emphasis is compatible with contemporary physiological and psychological research that understands memory as an active process of construction and reconstruction, rather than the mere storage and retrieval of information (Brockmeier, 2010; Olick, 2007; Schacter, 1995, 2002). Social memory studies bring to the fore the *collective* mnemonic practices of remembering and forgetting that keep a past event relevant. This allows us to analyze the way in which past events are remembered and also how they can be reinterpreted or forgotten by communities over time (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]; Schwartz, 1982).

No doubt memories of a past event can and usually do vary between individuals. However, collective memories are not simply the aggregate sum of individual memories

(Conway, 2003; Olick, 1999; Schudson, 1995). While the act of remembering is individual, actors often draw on shared narratives of a past event to frame and inform how and what they remember (Brockmeier, 2002; Conway, 2003; Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]; Olick & Robbins, 1998). In this sense, collective memories are shared, extra-individual representations of the past that resonate with members of a community at a certain point in time (Olick, 1999, 2007; Zerubavel, 1996).

Collective memories of a past event are socially sustained over time by mnemonic communities (Misztal, 2003; Zerubavel, 1996). These are groups of people and organizations that coalesce around a definite understanding of a past event (Aksu, 2009; Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]). While some people in a mnemonic community may have experienced the event directly, others may not and may have learned about it indirectly. For example, people of the Jewish faith have developed a mnemonic community around the shared remembrance of the Holocaust, even though many did not experience it firsthand (Hansen-Glucklich, 2014). While some members of a mnemonic community are relatively passive in the collective remembering or forgetting process, others are more active and influential. Active members have an interest in evoking and narrating a specific version of a past event for a variety of reasons (Fine, 2001; Lang & Lang, 1988). For example, Fine (1996) demonstrates how the US presidency of Warren Harding is remembered as one of incompetency, despite some well-documented successes. This memory was shaped by 'reputational entrepreneurs' who used a number of financial and moral scandals in Harding's cabinet to besmirch the entire presidential term. Some actors can thus keep a past event salient in the collective memory of a community by linking narratives about the past with present interests and prerogatives (Olick, 2007; Schudson, 1995). Importantly, this does not mean that others, outside the community, cannot remember this event. Rather, certain memory processes can function to galvanize

social interconnectivity within a community as they draw upon narratives of the past to crystalize present objectives.

As a mnemonic community forms around a common representation of an event, it creates collective mnemonic traces of that event. A mnemonic trace is a reminder, like a ritualized story. It helps members of a community to remember exactly what the shared narrative of their past is (Halbwachs, 1994 [1925]; Spillman, 1998). These traces are drawn upon by the mnemonic community to sustain the collective memory of a past event, but sometimes also to reconfigure or reframe it (Fine, 2001; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Biases and interpretations are inevitably built into mnemonic traces (Gross, 2000). They therefore carry symbolic meanings, which embody the beliefs and norms of a mnemonic community about a past event at a particular point in time (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]; Schudson, 1995). Mnemonic traces of past events can also be “maintained by objects in the world” (Hirst & Manier, 2008: 186). Such “objectivized” (Assmann, 1995b: 128) traces may take the form of archival documents, monuments, or museums that publically represent the past event (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]; Nora, 1989; Ricoeur, 2004). Therefore, mnemonic communities may draw upon immaterial (e.g., stories redolent with symbolic import) or material traces (e.g., statues or archives), and often both. For example, an army regiment might collectively remember a particular battle by creating and drawing upon material mnemonic traces like regiment regalia, photographs or framed commemorations for outstanding duty. But immaterial traces will also be important, such as regular storytelling about events leading up to a battle or myths of bravery (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009).

### **Collective Memory and Forgetting**

A mnemonic community can reconfigure its collective memory over time, as it modifies and discards mnemonic traces in light of its present beliefs. When this occurs, some

aspects of past events are remembered while others are forgotten (Assmann, 1995a; Schacter, 1995). As Schudson puts it, “a way of remembering is a way of forgetting” (1995: 348). This suggests that collective remembering and forgetting are not two processes working in diametrically opposed directions. Rather, they simultaneously create a shared version of the past to be used in the present. Collective memory, therefore, should be conceptualized as “a highly selective process which oscillates between remembering and forgetting” (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006: 109).

Collective forgetting is defined in social memory studies as the “absence of institutionalized memory” (Fine, 2012: 59) or the non-existence of a shared version of the past. When a specific collective memory is reconfigured, it can create several competing versions of a past event (Fine, 2001). It can also make a past event appear as if it were irrelevant to present matters. As a result, the past event is ultimately erased from collective memory and forgotten (Assmann, 1995a). Indeed, when a past event is not picked up and used as a template for future action, it ceases to remain in collective memory (Fine, 2012).

Memory typically fades over time both at the individual (Schacter, 2002) and collective (Schudson, 1995) level. It is, in fact, forgetting, rather than remembering, that is the primary function of memory (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006) given the vast number of events we encounter. Social memory studies suggest that passing time creates an emotional distance between a mnemonic community and past events. When this transpires, mnemonic communities are likely to forget about the past event (Erdelyi, 1990; Schacter, 1995, 2002; Schudson, 1995). That we forget more than we remember is often useful. Selective forgetting can have positive consequences (Hedberg, 1981; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984), since it helps mnemonic communities become sensitive to environmental changes and continue to evolve in response to their surroundings (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006). Studies of organizational learning have similarly demonstrated that selective forgetting is crucial for sustained

organizational life and continuity (Brown & Starkey, 2000; de Holan, 2011). For example, in a comparative study of several hotels in Cuba, de Holan & Phillips (2004) reveal the important role of managed organizational forgetting in the replacement of old routines with new and more efficient ones. Similarly, Anteby & Molnár (2012) examine how an aeronautics firm willfully omitted certain past events in its ‘rhetorical history’ (Suddaby et al., 2010) in an effort to maintain its identity. Social memory studies also often view collective forgetting as positive, as it prevents cognitive overload and helps communities make peace with their past (Connerton, 2008; Erdelyi, 1990; Olick, 2007; Ricoeur, 2004).

While forgetting can result from relatively passive, inertial mnemonic forces, it can also entail more active, instrumental processes (Fine, 2001, 2012; Lang & Lang, 1988; Olick, 2007). This has been acknowledged in organizational learning, as Easterby-Smith & Lyles point out, “history [...] may be reinvented or rewritten to provide a rationale for current decisions and ambitions. The rewriting of history may be deliberate and conscious (unlearning), or it may be largely accidental and unconscious as a result of the comings and goings of powerful individuals and groups or simply due to people forgetting the past” (2011: 313). Hence, some members of a mnemonic community, with an interest in a specific version of the past, act with different levels of intentionality to reconfigure and reconstruct preceding events. In doing so they modify, downplay or even erase them from collective memory (Brockmeier, 2002; Kammen, 1995).

Building on this insight, we explore the activities that underpin the collective forgetting of corporate irresponsibility events in more depth. While we acknowledge there are entropic forces that can drive the collective forgetting of such events, we argue that instrumental work may facilitate this forgetting process. We are particularly interested in understanding why some corporate irresponsibility events are forgotten more rapidly than others.

## **THE COLLECTIVE FORGETTING OF CORPORATE IRRESPONSIBILITY**

In order to help conceptualize the collective forgetting of corporate irresponsibility events we posit the following model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE  
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To explain the model, we begin by examining the several important, short-term conditions that are inherent to a corporate irresponsibility event: the degree of harm to stakeholders, the level of attention the event receives and the attribution of blame. These conditions can lead to the formation of a mnemonic community that includes the focal firm as well as internal and external stakeholders. The resulting stakeholder mnemonic community both generates and draws on mnemonic traces to remember and forget some aspects of the past event. Using these mnemonic traces, members of the community negotiate a shared memory of the event that can change over time.

This collective memory can also be shaped by forgetting work. This can include manipulating the short-term conditions of the event, silencing specific stakeholders and undermining mnemonic traces. When forgetting work is successful, it reconfigures the collective memory of a past corporate irresponsibility event. As we explain below, this makes it more likely that the mnemonic community will forget it. This can have positive consequences such as identity maintenance, as well as negative consequences, such as failure to learn from past mistakes.

### **Corporate Irresponsibility Events**

Corporate irresponsibility involves a firm doing harm to its environment, intentionally or not (Campbell, 2007; Minor & Morgan, 2011; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). A corporate



irresponsibility event is a temporally compact sequence of activities (Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001; Nigam & Ocasio, 2010) with which a firm is closely associated. These activities generate significant negative consequences for stakeholders and therefore endanger the firm's legitimacy and can lead to further negative outcomes for the firm, including fines or bankruptcy (Fleming & Jones, 2013; Godfrey et al., 2009; Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013).

In general, the literature tends to examine three important short-term conditions of corporate irresponsibility events that influence the initial collective memory of the event: the harm the event creates, the attention given to the event and how blame is attributed (Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller, & Miclani, 1988). Corporate irresponsibility events inflict varying degrees of harm on several internal and external stakeholders (Barnett, 2014; Schrepf-Stirling, Palazzo, & Phillips, forthcoming). The most obvious harm is the loss of human life. But corporate irresponsibility events can generate more widespread harm that has an impact on a range of stakeholders, such as the loss of non-human life and the loss of livelihoods in local communities. The diversity and complexity of the harm created by an event can generate significant uncertainty among stakeholders (Perrow, 1984; Shrivastava et al., 1988). One way in which uncertainty is reduced is by means of event attention.

Corporate irresponsibility events attract different levels of attention (Desai, 2014b; Hoffman, 1999; Nigam & Ocasio, 2010). The more focused the attention of stakeholders, the more likely the event will generate stakeholder responses (Barnett, 2014; Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001; Ingram, Yue, & Rao, 2010) and the more salient the event becomes for affected stakeholders and the general public (Desai, 2014b). The media plays a key role in the short-term struggle over whether an event holds our attention (e.g. Holt & Barkemeyer, 2012; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012). As it is largely focused on an immediate time horizon (Barkemeyer, Holt, Figge, & Napolitano, 2010; Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, Utz, & Oegema, 2013), the media affects the collective memory of a corporate irresponsibility event

in the short period of time directly following the event. The media debate that follows a corporate irresponsibility event, for example, frames it in a variety of ways that are usually driven by the way in which blame is attributed to different actors (Hoffman & Jennings, 2011).

Stakeholders seek to reduce uncertainty by assigning responsibility and attributing blame for the event to particular actors (Lange & Washburn, 2012; Pfarrer et al., 2008). This social process of sensemaking involves retrospectively inquiring as to what transpired during an event, who the central decision-makers were and who may be ultimately culpable for that event (Gephart, 1993). This process may occur in a range of different institutionalized forums, such as public inquiries (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988), the media (Desai, 2014b; Zavyalova et al., 2012) and direct firm-stakeholder confrontations (Waldron et al., 2013). Through blame attribution, the complexity and overlapping responsibilities associated with the event are reduced and projected onto identifiable actors (Gephart, 1993), even if such attribution can be disrupted (Javeline, 2003).

### **Stakeholder Mnemonic Community**

When a corporate irresponsibility event occurs and causes significant harm, attracts sufficient attention and provokes specific attributions of blame, it often triggers the development of a mnemonic community. The mnemonic community generated by these processes can include the firm and some of its internal and external stakeholders, like the firm's members (managers, employees, shareholders, etc.), competitors and business partners, consumers, the media and journalists (who provide accounts of the event), governments and regulatory institutions, and other relevant civil society members that may be affected (e.g. the families of employees, local communities, etc.) or have an interest in the event (e.g. NGOs or activists). A stakeholder mnemonic community is likely to undergo changes in membership

over time. This occurs when external actors are attracted to the community by renewed interest in the event or when others join because they are affected by delayed externalities of the event. Hence, a stakeholder may be part of a mnemonic community without having directly experienced the event in question (Zerubavel, 1996). Typically, employees not directly involved in causing the event or who did not experience its direct consequences will hear about it from management, fellow employees, customers and, perhaps, the media (Desai, 2014b; March & Olsen, 1975).

Within a mnemonic community, some members “compete to control collective memory, and this is subject to dynamic change over time” (Fine, 2012: 94). Most members of these communities are relatively passive when it comes to asserting the “‘correct’ way to interpret the past” (Zerubavel, 1996: 295). However, other members – who we will call rememberers – engage more actively in shaping how the event is remembered. Rememberers often have an interest in institutionalizing a certain version of the event. Activist groups frequently play the role of rememberers for past corporate irresponsibility events. However, they often lack the necessary resources and coordination mechanisms to sustain their campaigns over long periods of time (Taylor, 1989). Moreover, the most vocal rememberers are likely to change as time passes due to the resources they can access and their ability to sustain interest in the cause (Pfarrer et al., 2008).

### **Collective Mnemonic Traces of Corporate Irresponsibility Events**

A stakeholder mnemonic community generates a range of collective mnemonic traces of a corporate irresponsibility event. The community also draws on these traces to sustain its collective memory of the event. Stakeholders often create highly symbolic mnemonic traces such as commemorations of killed workers or stories of how tragic events unfolded (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Employees can generate narratives about their firm’s past and

management can highlight certain aspects of an event while obscuring others (Booth et al., 2007; March & Olsen, 1975). Collective mnemonic traces of corporate irresponsibility events can also have a material component, like the ruins of a collapsed factory, traces of pollutants in the natural environment or the physical deformities they may cause (Shrivastava et al., 1988). Firms often produce a variety of documents about the event including internal memos and public statements that proffer particular narratives of the event. Other stakeholders, NGOs and the media in particular, also generate written traces in the form of incriminating reports on the firm's activities or journalistic analyses. Such collective mnemonic traces provide the raw material that mnemonic communities use to help sustain the collective memory of the event and, in doing so, maintain a particular version of the past.

### **FORGETTING WORK**

Collective memory is affected by instrumental forgetting work (Fine, 2012), even if it is “not necessarily calculated” (Schudson, 1995: 352) and the outcomes are not always those that were expected (Olick & Robbins, 1998). Forgetting work involves purposeful attempts to reconfigure, dilute and thwart the collective memory of an event. We propose that this occurs through the articulation of narratives (Booth et al., 2007; Brockmeier, 2002) and the exercise of power (Kammen, 1995; Ricoeur, 2004; Schudson, 1995). Narratives give meaning to the past event so that some of aspects are attended to, while others are obscured and disregarded (Booth et al., 2007; Brockmeier, 2002; Ricoeur, 2004). Exercise of power “can shape the interactions among actors that are the underpinnings of memory structures” (Casey & Olivera, 2011: 308). Power can sanction some stakeholders as the legitimate bearers of collective memory while disempowering or disqualifying others (Brockmeier, 2002; Ricoeur, 2004; Zerubavel, 1996).

Forgetting work can be undertaken by firms, their management or other actors (such as industry associations and sometimes employees) who have an interest in mitigating the short and long-term negative impact of the event and enhancing the positive consequences of forgetting. Forgetting work does not necessarily imply coordinated and intentional action. Rather it is often the result of a range of activities with different intended time horizons and degrees of intentionality. Furthermore, forgetting work rarely exists in isolation. Firms engaged in forgetting work can also react to an event in other ways, like asking for forgiveness, at the same time (Pfarrer et al., 2008).

We suggest that forgetting work unfolds over time. In the short-term, it involves *manipulating* the immediate perceptions of a corporate irresponsibility event. In the longer term, forgetting work can entail *silencing* members of the mnemonic community and *undermining* collective mnemonic traces. We now examine these three different types of forgetting work in more depth.

### **Manipulating: Forgetting Work Following a Corporate Irresponsibility Event**

Manipulation is the primary form of forgetting work that immediately follows an instance of corporate irresponsibility. Its purpose is to control the initial collective memory of an event so that the negative association between the firm and the event will be diminished. Impression management studies demonstrate how, following (and sometimes prior to) organizational failures, errors or scandals, organizations attempt to influence stakeholder perceptions (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998; McDonnell & King, 2013). This strategy is directed at both internal (e.g. employees) and external (e.g. journalists, NGOs) stakeholders (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Desai, 2014a; Elsbach et al., 1998). In a similar vein, forgetting work conducted by manipulation is aimed at changing, influencing and managing stakeholders' perceptions of a corporate irresponsibility event. This will entail attempts to

mitigate the perceived harm caused by the event, divert attention away from the event and distort the attribution of blame. Such attempts will be more successful if the perceived harm and level of attention are initially low and blame is not clearly attributed.

Forgetting work can manipulate stakeholders' perceptions of how harmful an event is and, as such, it has an influence on the salience of the collective memory of the event in the future. For example, in 2013, a government investigation revealed that many products being sold as beef in UK supermarkets actually contained horse meat from Romania. Immediately following the scandal, one of the largest grocery firms involved took out a one-page newspaper advertisement (in most daily newspapers) stating that this was a supply chain breach and that the consumption of horse meat posed no health risk to consumers. The question of deception was shifted to one of potential physical harm, with the majority of medical experts correctly stating that eating horse meat did not constitute a health risk for consumers.

Forgetting work can also involve manipulating the attention devoted to a corporate irresponsibility event. For instance, a firm and its affiliates might manipulate narratives targeted at different stakeholders through the media (Desai, 2014b). Such a strategy is facilitated by the fact that media attention is frequently short-lived (Fine, 2012; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2013). Forgetting work can aim to change the tenor of news reporting (e.g. Fine, 2012), diverting attention to another issue (e.g. Zavyalova et al., 2012), diluting negative perceptions by emphasizing generic prosocial behavior (e.g. McDonnell & King, 2013) or presenting the firm in a more favorable light (e.g. Desai, 2014a, b; Pfarrer et al., 2008). For example, following an ecological disaster resulting from operations at the Talvivaara nickel mine in Finland, the majority owner and CEO Pekka Perä stated that because of the focus on environmental issues in news coverage, the public had ignored the jobs and economic growth the mine had generated in the region (Virta, 2012).

The manipulation of narratives can also occur inside the firm (Desai, 2014b). Top-down communication from management about the ‘official’ framing of an event can influence employees’ knowledge of it (Crossan et al., 1999; Desai, 2014a; March & Olsen, 1975). These official narratives are frequently translated into organizational memory and corporate history (Levitt & March, 1988; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Schrempf-Stirling et al., forthcoming). Moreover, the narratives that appear immediately after an event can obscure some aspects of the event internally (Hedberg, 1981), with employees sometimes knowing less than external stakeholders (Argote, 2012).

Forgetting work can also manipulate the way in which blame is attributed for a particular corporate irresponsibility event. When blame is attributed to a firm, it can react by either accepting or denying responsibility. Denial is the most likely response (Zadek, 2004). Firms may also try to shift responsibility for the failure to other actors, such as sub-contractors. But firms can also accept responsibility and address issues through either substantive (King, 2008; Pfarrer et al., 2008) or symbolic action (MacLean & Behnam, 2010). Firms might apologize following a scandal, ask for forgiveness and undertake substantive changes to their controversial practices (Pfarrer et al., 2008). Substantive changes can also be forced upon them by regulators. Amnesty granted by a regulator and asking for forgiveness both increase the likelihood of long-term collective forgetting (Olick, 2007; Ricoeur, 2004). Firms can also accept responsibility, but engage only in symbolic or token gestures, making a surface level change (that signals compliance) while actual business practices remain unaltered (MacLean & Behnam, 2010; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991). For instance, following the financial scandals around predatory lending in the wake of the 2008 crisis, many organizations adopted ethics training programs, but openly argued that high-risk credit was an industry-level problem rather than a specific organizational concern (Admati & Hellwig, 2013). By undertaking ceremonial rather than substantial changes in this manner,

blame is both accepted and deflected, with the hope that forgiveness and ultimately forgetting may ensue (Ricoeur, 2004).

### **Silencing: Forgetting Work on the Stakeholder Mnemonic Community**

In the longer term, forgetting work can also involve silencing members of a mnemonic community. This can have a significant influence on collective forgetting, as the memory of a past corporate irresponsibility event has to be sustained by someone (Brockmeier, 2002; Fine, 2012). Silencing members of a mnemonic community disconnects them from the past event and from each other, delegitimizes rememberers' narratives as being unworthy of being heard and ultimately downplays their version of the past event. Silencing may be conducted at different points in time since rememberers can be vocal at different moments. Silencing will thus be more successful if rememberers are less coordinated in their remembering work and if they are unable to express their claims meaningfully.

In some cases, actors might attempt to silence rememberers by carefully monitoring their activities. Nestlé, for example, hired a private security firm to infiltrate and spy on activists involved in a vocal NGO called Attac. Its aim was to prevent the group from divulging compromising information on Nestlé's trade union policies (Crevoisier & Sansonnens, 2012).

Silencing may also function by co-opting certain rememberers within a mnemonic community and using their point of view to alter the narrative around the event. Co-optation is "a defensive mechanism" that integrates the narratives of oppositional groups "as a means of averting threats to [the organization's] stability or existence" (Selznick, 1948: 34). This can be particularly effective when activist groups with strong public profiles are co-opted. To gain ground on a targeted firm, activist groups must often make concessions or become closer to the firm and become less vocal or radical over time as a result (Zald, 2000; Jaffee, 2012;



Trumpy, 2008). Such a reconfiguration of rememberers' narratives further disconnects them from the event and ultimately erodes their remembering work (Trumpy, 2008).

Obviously, the media plays an important role in facilitating the collective remembering of corporate irresponsibility events (Pfarrer et al., 2008). Silencing work can thus be directed at the media, which can be treated as a specific type of rememberer. Indeed, firms invest a great deal in controlling their media communications and how they are represented in the public realm (Desai, 2014a, b; Zavyalova et al., 2012). We have argued that forgetting work can manipulate short-term media attention, but long-term forgetting work can also focus on silencing the media. In his study of a large, but long unknown US oil spill in San Luis Obispo, Beamish (2000) reports that site managers repeatedly lied (i.e. stated that there was no spill) to the media to prevent the release of potentially damaging news stories.

Silencing may also be aimed at internal stakeholders. Organizational decision makers can repeat official narratives about a past event over time to prevent employees with 'deviant memories' from speaking up (Levitt & March, 1988: 327; March & Olsen, 1975). Indeed, the memories of a lone employee are unlikely to influence collective memory (Argote, McEvily, & Reagans, 2003), especially when this employee perceives her viewpoint as being that of a minority and thus fears exclusion (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Zerubavel, 2006). Barriers to whistleblowing provide an apposite example of how employees are silenced in this manner. Potential whistleblowers face immense obstacles to 'going public' with their concerns. These obstacles include organizational culture and structure (Beamish, 2000; Morrison & Milliken, 2003) as well as the threat of direct intimidation from other members of the organization, often including top management (Miethe & Rothschild, 1994; Warren, 2007). These barriers are reinforced by the official story of past events that has become embedded in the organization over time. In the case of the San Luis Obispo oil spill, employees remained silent

about the spill for nearly 40 years, not only because they feared punishment, but also because the organization's culture implicitly rendered the topic taboo (Beamish, 2000).

### **Undermining: Forgetting Work on Collective Mnemonic Traces**

Forgetting work may also undermine collective memory by targeting the mnemonic traces of corporate irresponsibility events (Conway, 2003). Actors can undermine collective mnemonic traces in many ways: by destroying them, preventing access to them, distorting their meanings and associated beliefs or even fabricating alternative traces that promote a different version of the past event (Booth et al., 2007; Ricoeur, 2004). It is easier to do this if mnemonic traces are few, weak, scattered or even contradictory (Fine, 2001; Nora, 1989; Ricoeur, 2004).

Firms may destroy collective mnemonic traces, particularly those that are instantiated in a material artifact. This 'structural amnesia' (Assmann, 1995a) is obvious when a firm destroys written mnemonic traces of a past corporate irresponsibility event, such as records and archives. This is what happened in our opening example of HealthSouth, where visible references to the disgraced CEO were erased from official documents and architecture. In a related example, monuments erected near Australian Steelworks to commemorate workers killed in industrial accidents were removed by the company during 'redevelopment' (Ryan & Wray-Bliss, 2012).

Undermining forgetting work can also be conducted by inventing new, alternative traces. For example, the tobacco industry is known to have fabricated scientific evidence and reports that proved smoking tobacco is harmless (Palazzo & Mena, 2009). Non-material mnemonic traces are fabricated by creating alternative narratives. Greenwashing, typically, is an attempt to undermine and reconfigure the beliefs related to a firm's environmental behavior (Delmas & Cuerel Burbano, 2011). Bansal & Clelland (2004) find that firms with

low environmental legitimacy can nevertheless preserve their long-term reputation by repeatedly communicating about the natural environment and expressing their commitment to sustainable environmental practices, even when this commitment does not exist.

Yet another way that forgetting work can undermine collective mnemonic traces is by preventing a mnemonic community from accessing them. For example, a firm may divest from a region so that there is no longer a symbolically charged target to animate collective memory or may restructure the organization to ‘outsource’ blame to a subsidiary (Pfarrer et al., 2008). This is exemplified in the case of Anadarko, a petroleum firm that recently ‘gifted’ abandoned, contaminated sites to a subsidiary, Kerr-McGee. The mnemonic traces that might have aided collective recollection literally disappeared. Moreover, Kerr-McGee was restructured and sold its environmental debt to another company that, in the meantime, filed for bankruptcy (Tucker & Cappiello, 2014).

Forgetting work may also distort mnemonic traces by changing the norms and beliefs that are associated with them. This type of forgetting work deploys new mnemonic traces to tell an official story that aims to overshadow other ways of portraying the event (Crossan et al., 1999; Levitt & March, 1988). As a result, stakeholders who have profound and often disturbing memories of an event can find their memories being written out, marginalized or excluded from the official narrative (Conway, 2003). For example, indigenous people in Australia who were violently displaced by the expansion of agricultural and mining industries argue that their suffering was actively obscured by official narratives of progress, modernization and civilization. As a result, defining indigenous experiences and beliefs associated with their ancestral lands were undermined (Manne, 2001), aiding the overall dispossession process.

The same process applies to the deviant memories that employees may hold. The induction of new employees can significantly decrease the importance of disturbing

mnemonic traces in the workforce by socializing them with values and beliefs (March, 1991) that omit more controversial elements of the past (Zerubavel, 1996). For example, Rowlinson (2002) describes how Cadbury tells its own corporate history in the context of the Cadbury World museum and the booklet 'The Cadbury Story'. In both, any uncomfortable connections to the slave labor used to produce cocoa in the past are absent.

### **Reconfiguration of Collective Memory and Consequences of Collective Forgetting**

Forgetting work ultimately reconfigures the collective memory of a past event. Reconfiguration aids forgetting work because it reframes the past event in such a manner that it becomes more susceptible to recall failure. In the context of corporate irresponsibility, this is why much forgetting work aims to create an alternative version of a past event that distances the firm from its responsibility for that event (e.g. Fine, 2001). In particular, silencing those who support an account of the event in which the firm is responsible enables the formulation of an alternative version of the past (Fine, 2012). Alternative versions of the past often selectively evoke the past or even claim that certain past events are irrelevant to present matters (Assmann, 1995a). Moreover, when a past corporate irresponsibility event becomes irrelevant to the present, it no longer has any sort of impact on present practices or beliefs and will cease to serve as a template for similar actions in the future (Fine, 2012). Ultimately, we propose that this will lead to the absence of an institutionalized collective memory of the event, which equates to collective forgetting (Assmann, 1995a; Brockmeier, 2002; Fine, 2012).

With the collective forgetting of past instances of corporate irresponsibility, firms are able to maintain their organizational identity through denial or rationalization (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Gabriel, 1999; Pearson & Clair, 1998). The forgetting or remembering of specific events related to the focal firm by stakeholders has a strong influence on how the

identity of the firm is perceived (Scott & Lane, 2000). As “disasters call into question the social legitimacy and continued societal sanctioning of hazardous organizations, industries, and technologies” (Levitt & March, 1988: 324), forgetting also serves to legitimate the firm in its environment and stabilize relationships with stakeholders, thereby ensuring its survival (Connerton, 2008; Erdelyi, 1990; Olick, 2007; Ricoeur, 2004). As such, collective forgetting has a number of positive consequences for the firm and the mnemonic community.

However, collective forgetting has negative consequences as well, the greatest of these being the failure to learn from past mistakes (e.g. Brunsson, 2009; Cannon & Edmondson, 2005; Madsen, 2009). For example, research on the mining industry suggests that on average, firms tend to learn from disasters to some extent, but such learning diminishes over time as the event is forgotten (Madsen, 2009). While knowledge acquired through failure depreciates more slowly than knowledge from success (Madsen & Desai, 2010), we suggest that instrumental forgetting work may mitigate this process. As a result, fundamental lessons that may be learned from organizational failure remain untapped and similar failures are likely to happen again (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011). Furthermore, firms are less likely to learn from others’ mistakes if this occurs (Madsen, 2009). This is illustrated by the recent history of the Bangladeshi garment industry. Several incidents that threatened the lives of factory workers, including factory collapses in 2005, 2006 and 2010 and a lethal factory fire in 2012 were actively forgotten by management. Tragically, these events were followed by the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 that claimed thousands of lives (Human Rights Watch, 2013), an event that is now much more salient in collective memory compared to previous similar incidents.

We also argue that as an event is forgotten, stakeholder pressure on the firm will weaken, which in turn will prompt members of the organization to increasingly forget lessons from the past. Thus, even if some routines have been put in place following an irresponsibility

event, the firm will eventually relax the observance of those routines as a result of gradual forgetting (Madsen, 2009). As a result, it becomes more likely that the event will occur again (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we have developed a conceptual model to explain how some corporate irresponsibility events are forgotten despite their traumatic nature. Drawing on social and organizational memory studies, we proposed that a corporate irresponsibility event can form a stakeholder mnemonic community, comprised of different actors who are bound together by a particular memory of that event. This community generates and draws on mnemonic traces as it seeks to keep that collective memory relevant. We have focused on how forgetting work can impede such attempts. Forgetting work can, in the short term, manipulate the immediate reactions to the event and, in the longer term, silence members of the mnemonic community and undermine collective mnemonic traces. While other forces might also lead to collective forgetting, we have suggested that forgetting work can facilitate the reconfiguration of collective memory and the collective forgetting of a corporate irresponsibility event. Several moderating effects will influence whether forgetting work is successful or not. The model is also subject to a number of limitations that may guide future research and contributions in this area.

### **Moderating Effects**

It is reasonable to assume that there will be cases in which attempts to encourage collective forgetting do not succeed or at least do not function as effectively as expected. One way to identify the most salient boundary conditions of the forgetting work modeled in this paper is to examine moderating effects that might make forgetting work more or less likely to

be effective. We approach the issue in this manner because we do not expect one type of forgetting work to be more effective than another in general. Although forgetting work can be conducted in singular instances (e.g., only at the outset of the event), we assume that forgetting work is most effective when it is carried out over time, in response to shifting and contingent conditions. Moreover, we have demonstrated how firms can manipulate the initial conditions of corporate irresponsibility events, notably by denying or accepting responsibility. While the choice of such short-term responses is likely to shape the longer-term collective memory process, this does not prevent firms and other actors interested in forgetting from undertaking forgetting work concurrently or at later points in time. More specifically, we identify five moderating effects that may influence the effectiveness of forgetting work.

First, the initial conditions of corporate irresponsibility events (the degree of harm, the level of attention attracted and how blame is attributed) will likely determine the amount of manipulating forgetting work requires to successfully bring about the collective forgetting of an event. When the levels of harm and attention around an event of corporate irresponsibility are high and when an organization is unambiguously blamed for the event, forgetting work is likely to be less successful. This is because the event will be inherently more memorable given its emotional resonance (Schacter, 1995, 2002; Schudson, 1995). In such cases, remembrance of the event may persist despite the forgetting work involved.

Second, power must invariably play a role in determining whether or not actors engaged in forgetting work are able to effectively silence stakeholders and impede the formation of a robust mnemonic community. The level of power held by members of a mnemonic community will influence their capacity to perform authoritative remembering work. When rememberers have the power to coordinate and engage in organized mnemonic action, silencing them will be more difficult and less likely to lead to rapid collective forgetting (Armstrong & Cragg, 2006; Fine, 2012). The same is true when rememberers are

less accommodating to a firm, which will reduce the chances that their collective narrative will be co-opted. The collective remembering or forgetting of a past event will therefore hinge in large part on the mnemonic struggle that ensues and on the power of the actors involved.

Third, while undermining mnemonic traces at different points in time can hasten collective forgetting, it will depend on the number, substance and cohesion of these traces. When collective mnemonic traces are numerous and easily accessible to stakeholders, forgetting work is less likely to facilitate rapid collective forgetting. This is because stakeholders can draw on these traces more easily to collectively remember (Fine, 2001; Nora, 1989; Ricoeur, 2004). When mnemonic traces exist, but are contradictory or dispersed, firms involved in a corporate irresponsibility event can weave alternative narratives more easily (Spillman, 1998). Forgetting work is likely to be more successful in such cases. Efforts to undermine collective memory will also be affected by the intensity of the emotions attached to mnemonic traces. If traces are institutionalized and taken-for-granted (i.e. not marginal) in the mnemonic community, forgetting work will probably be less successful in hastening the process of collective forgetting (Fine, 2012).

Fourth, we suggest that the speed with which a firm assumes full responsibility for an event and asks for forgiveness from stakeholders is likely to facilitate collective forgetting, especially if the firm undertakes substantive changes to prevent the recurrence of similar events (Ricoeur, 2004). However, while a firm may ask for forgiveness from the outset (immediately following an event) they may still engage in forgetting work at the same time or later on. In some cases, a firm might accept responsibility, but will still seek to silence some stakeholders, as has occurred among corporations involved in the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. Therefore, we propose that forgetting work will be more effective and will lead to collective forgetting more rapidly when all three types of work are conducted over time and when responsibility is assumed rather than denied or only admitted long after the event.



And fifth, if the event is singular and unique in a specific organizational field – rendering it a standalone incident – then we suggest that forgetting work will be more difficult to achieve than if the event is merely one of many similar events. This is because an event grouping that over-populates an industry or sector will tend to dilute the attention that may have otherwise been attributed to one particular firm (Barnett, 2006; Desai, 2011). Forgetting work can be expedited if the event is deemed an ‘industry problem’ rather than an individual organizational one.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Our argument inevitably brings with it a number of limitations and unaddressed issues. These may inform future research on this topic. First, while we have built on social and organizational memory studies, we do not fully explore the impact of collective forgetting on internal organizational processes of memory and forgetting. As we have noted, employees may play a more or less active role in forgetting depending on the nature of the corporate irresponsibility event. While we have emphasized the role of employees in our model of collective forgetting, we believe more research is required to understand the precise interactions between memory at the mnemonic community and the organizational levels. For example, how can external and internal stakeholders interact more meaningfully in order to embed knowledge from past transgressions in a firm’s routines?

Second, more research is required to understand how the different types of forgetting work we have identified interact in concrete organizational settings. For example, we have assumed that each form of forgetting work reinforces the other in a processual manner. However, more attention could be devoted to exploring precisely how different forms of forgetting work impede or potentially reinforce one another. Special attention might be given to how the process of forgetting interacts with the dynamics of remembering. Examining the

interplay between these forms of remembering and forgetting work more closely is likely to yield insights into the process of reconfiguration of collective memory.

A third limitation and avenue for future research involves the role of forgiveness in collective forgetting. We usually assume that repentance leads to forgiveness, which will in turn wash away past transgressions and help us forget and move on (Ricoeur, 2004). As we have mentioned, forgiveness-seeking behavior does not necessarily prevent actors from undertaking forgetting work. But what exactly are the interactional dynamics between the request for forgiveness and the subsequent deployment of the different types of forgetting work? Moreover, the link between forgiveness and the memories of past transgressions (especially in the long-term) is still conceptually tenuous in our argument. If forgiveness is granted, for example, is the corporate irresponsibility event forgotten or does it simply lose its harsher negative connotations?

Our model risks imputing an unrealistically rational agent as the driver of forgetting work, which is the fourth limitation that might be further explored. To what extent is forgetting work by firms, managers, or other actors intentional and coordinated? The question has a number of interesting implications, especially in relation to business ethics. We have acknowledged that collective forgetting has clear benefits for the focal organization and sometimes for other stakeholders. But it can also yield negative outcomes for society in general, especially in terms of repeated mistakes and harm. Are forgetting workers cognizant of this ethical component when engaging in instrumental forgetting work? And what would that imply for how we think about corporate responsibility and the role of firms in society? If forgetting work is the norm rather than the exception, we suggest an exploration of how more authentic collective memories might be supported because, as Schacter vividly puts it, “a memory system that consistently produced seriously distorted outputs would wreak havoc with our very existence” (1995: 2).

## **Contributions**

This paper has sought to extend a number of existing debates in the study of corporate responsibility as well as memory in organization and management studies. First, we develop the existing literature on reactions to corporate irresponsibility (e.g. Barnett, 2014; Hendry, 2005). Much of this research tends to concentrate on the short-term processes of audience evaluation, attention and sensemaking of harmful events, as well as the politics of blame attribution (Lange & Washburn, 2012) and forgiveness (Pfarrer et al., 2008). By focusing on issues of (collective) memory, our argument highlights how an instance of corporate irresponsibility can have an impact that extends far beyond the audience's immediate evaluation of events. And this longer-term impact is constructed and reconstructed in an ongoing manner by different actors (Fine, 2001). Thus, a complete understanding of how stakeholders evaluate corporate irresponsibility needs to incorporate the long-term development of mnemonic processes and the social forces that can thwart and undermine how we remember a traumatic event.

The second debate we contribute to concerns memory in organization and management studies. Several areas of research have identified how memory in organizations becomes a collective achievement that is reached through organizational routines (Arthur & Huntley, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988; Walsh & Ungson, 1991), the articulation and circulation of narratives, stories and experiences (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Booth et al., 2007) and can ultimately serve to establish a competitive advantage (Argote, 2012; Foster et al., 2011; Suddaby et al., 2010). However, we note that memory is not only reducible to organizational level dynamics or competitive dynamics within a population of firms (e.g. Madsen, 2009). Memory can also pertain to and be shaped by mnemonic communities of stakeholders who operate at a supra-organizational level with little interest in the firm's

competitiveness. Even if a firm and its competitors may have forgotten a particular past event, the collective memory of that event may still be relevant to actors outside these firms.

As well as articulating a broader conceptualization of memory, we explore another aspect of the mnemonic process – forgetting. Many contemporary organizations appear to go to great lengths to guarantee that lessons learned from the past are forgotten and eliminated from the memory of the organization (Alvesson, 2013; Brunsson, 2009; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). We believe this forgetting work is a central reason why particular memories come to be excluded from the shared narratives that stakeholders have of an organization. We suggest that forgetting does not only imply the positive consequences that existing research has tended to emphasize (e.g. de Holan & Phillips, 2004; de Holan, Phillips, & Lawrence, 2004). It can also have more negative social implications. In particular, it can facilitate an inability to learn from past mistakes, encouraging the repetition of questionable and even harmful courses of action (Brunsson, 2009; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011). Forgetting might even serve as a sort of resource for perpetuating questionable behavior in a systematic fashion. In this respect, we hope our paper inspires future research into the wider implications of how major instances of corporate irresponsibility are remembered and forgotten.

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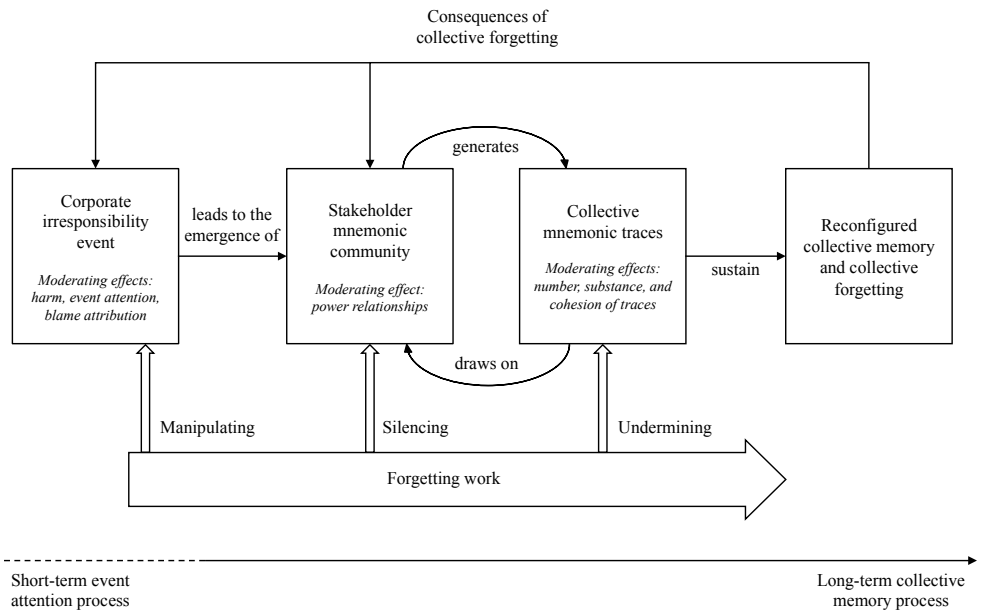


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**FIGURE 1**

**Collective Forgetting of Corporate Irresponsibility**



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## Publication 2

**Rintamäki, Jukka; Sorsa, Ville-Pekka. Unpublished essay.**

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# Forgetting the unforgivable: corporate irresponsibility and memory work strategies

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## Abstract

Collective memory is an intrinsic feature of all societal and institutional structures, and an important political space for defining authority and creating new social orders. In this paper, we argue that research addressing how memory work over past corporate irresponsibility affects the current responsibility norms and perceptions of corporate (ir)responsibility has been lacking. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to start filling this research gap by first identifying how memory work can influence corporate responsibility norms and by demonstrating how corporations have mobilized memory work strategies to manipulate perceptions of major transgressions to their benefit at present. We argue that businesses can employ three memory work strategies to shape current conceptions and perceptions of responsibility: re-narrativization of the past, disconnecting the past from the present, and direct mobilization of institutional forces of the past to the present context.

**Keywords:** collective memory, corporate irresponsibility, institutional work, memory work

## Introduction

Many events of corporate irresponsibility cause irrevocable harm to the surrounding society in the form of lost lives and livelihoods, destroyed homes, spoiled natural habitats, and medical conditions and injuries. Although some of these events stay in our collective memory, it seems that most events or acts of irresponsibility are forgotten relatively soon after they have been revealed. Such forgetting occurs frequently even with cases where severe negligence or callousness have been discovered and established as facts – that is, exactly when one would expect active remembrance to prevent such activities from taking place again. One such largely forgotten case is that of *Chemie Grünenthal*.

The case of the pharmaceutical company Chemie Grünenthal and thalidomide is a particularly traumatic example of corporate irresponsibility, which is nearly entirely forgotten (Evans, 2014). Between 1956 and 1961, Chemie Grünenthal marketed drugs that contained thalidomide for respiratory infections and morning sickness. Thalidomide caused severe neural damage, leading to thousands of infant deaths, deformities, and permanent neural disorders in adults. Despite lengthy trials against the firm, neither the firm nor any single person was ever convicted. Chemie Grünenthal was granted immunity from further legal proceedings in the 1960s. Even after allegations of insufficient testing before the product launch, dishonest promotion, and the obstruction of justice, the firm continued to sell the prescription drug in Argentina until the year 2000. The firm (now Grünenthal Group) continues to thrive, and it appears that the repercussions (notably involuntary manslaughter) of such corporate negligence soon became and remain mostly forgotten. Nor did the pharmaceutical industry learn from the irresponsibility of one of its members at the time, as the industry was wracked by several similar scandals over the following decades (e.g. Braithwaite, 2013).

Although collective forgetting of such cases as Chemie Grünenthal partly takes place ‘naturally’ through cultural processes (see Olick & Robbins, 1998), recent research has emphasized the role of intentional corporate activity in order to facilitate the forgetting of such events (Mena, Rintamäki, Spicer & Fleming, 2015). According to Mena et al. (ibid.), corporations have taken up several types of measures of ‘forgetting work’ in order to efficiently move forward from events of irresponsibility. In effect, this refers to the manipulation of perception over the short-term consequences of irresponsibility, and silencing of stakeholders and undermining of mnemonic traces of the irresponsibility in the longer run. While the mechanisms for shaping collective memory over past transgressions have been identified and it is already known that firms in fact have used these mechanisms, it is still unclear what types of *strategies* firms take up in this kind of memory work. MorFe specifically, there is still little

knowledge on *what* exactly firms can and do influence with memory work, and with *what kinds of measures* firms have adopted, to hide, deny or otherwise manipulate perceptions of past irresponsibility to the current benefit of the firm.

Organizations are known to manage their reputation and legitimacy as well as influence public discourse with various types of communication measures (e.g. Nyberg, Spicer & Wright, 2013; Perrow, 2002; Spicer & Fleming, 2007; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Typically this occurs in connection to perceived organizational misconduct (Pfarrer, Decelles, Smith & Taylor, 2008; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger & Shapiro, 2012). Firms are also known to use various means to influence corporate responsibility norms or their applicability to the events that have taken place in order to manipulate perceptions of corporate (ir)responsibility to their advantage (Joutsenvirta, 2011; Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015; Siltaoja, 2009). While the literature on the various types of discursive strategies that organizations take up in order to influence their surroundings to their benefit is relatively deep and rife with useful insights, the memory work strategies that utilize and manipulate the past to benefit the present are still poorly understood. In order to gain better understanding on the role of memory work in reputation management and maintenance of legitimacy, the literature on collective memory of the so-called ‘social memory studies’ (Olick & Robbins, 1998) proves helpful. The explicit purpose of social memory studies (SMS) is to shed light on processes of how the past is utilized and manipulated to influence the present (Schudson, 1992) and how the present is used to retell the past (Olick & Robbins, 1998). While SMS have seen their popularity increase in the study of organizations (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Rowlinson et al., 2010; Sørensen, 2014), only very recently have they been utilized in investigations of irresponsible corporate behavior (Mena et al., 2015). This has coincided, however, with an increasing interest in longer-term perspectives to corporate irresponsibility (Schrempf-Stirling, Palazzo & Philips, 2015).

In this paper, we continue the work of Mena and colleagues (2015), who have demonstrated how forgetting work occurs in cases on corporate irresponsibility. The purpose of this paper is to take a step further and to study how memory work is used to manipulate the attributions and perceptions of (corporate) irresponsibility itself. We are guided by the following research question: *What kind of memory work strategies firms use to manipulate the collective memory of their past irresponsibility and how are they used to benefit the current interests of the firms?* Our more specific focus is on cases that we call ‘unforgivable’ corporate irresponsibility. By this, we refer to cases in which firms have produced tangible and irreversible harm to their surroundings, and in which irresponsibility has been attributed to the firms through strong



institutional channels. Corporate irresponsibility has thus become indisputable at the time when the case has been in public spotlight and likely to have major negative effects to reputation and legitimacy of the firm. Thanks to the severe and irreversible nature of transgressions, there are only two ways for a firm to avoid social stigmas in the longer run in such cases: either the firm compensates for its wrongdoings indefinitely and without certainty about what kind of compensation might be enough or when, or it tries to change how the past norms and events are perceived or connected to the current state of affairs. As we will demonstrate, firms often choose the latter strategy.

In the following section, we will elaborate on the significance of collective memory in cases of corporate (ir)responsibility. We argue that memory work can play an important part not only in remembering past events but also in manipulating the perceptions of past irresponsibility events but as well as present conceptions of responsibility. In the third section of the paper, we discuss how memory work can influence corporate responsibility norms and their applicability to the past activities of a firm. More specifically, we will address the different types of institutional work projects with which firms can institute alternative histories of (ir)responsibility, maintain selective narratives and disrupt the perceptions of irresponsibility of their past events to avoid potential stigmas of past irresponsibility. In the fourth section, we raise empirical examples that illustrate how businesses, which have committed acts of ‘unforgivable’ irresponsibility, have manipulated their past irresponsibility with memory work projects. In the conclusions section, we will then discuss the significance of our findings and provide some possible avenues for further research in this field.

## **Corporate irresponsibility and collective memory**

Corporate irresponsibility has recently raised much attention in corporate social responsibility (CSR) studies. Various authors have contested the narrow notion of CSR as corporations doing good (see Margolis et al., 2007), and shifted attention to the previously mostly ignored topic of corporate irresponsibility (e.g. Fleming & Jones, 2013; Lange & Washburn, 2012; Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013; Tench et al., 2012; Windsor, 2013). One key feature in these discussions has been, if not always explicitly, the questioning of the so-called Iron Law of Responsibility – i.e., in the long run, those who do not use power in a manner which society considers responsible

will tend to lose it (Davis, 1973) – which holds that the operating licenses of businesses are permitted to them by the broader society and that this license can and will be taken away by the society in cases of sufficiently severe misconduct. While this idea has had its share of critique in the past (see Acquier et al., 2011; Garriga & Melé, 2004), it has not been subjected to heavy scrutiny until very recently (Lange & Washburn, 2012; Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013). Some scholars have recently asserted that corporate irresponsibility will lead to severe negative outcomes for firms, citing a few examples such as Enron and WorldCom (Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013). However, as others have pointed out (e.g. Fleming & Jones, 2013; Zyglidopoulos & Fleming, 2011), these few examples of catastrophic consequences for the transgressor are not the rule, but rather the exception, and even these exceptions are typically transgressions of a financial or economic nature, not social or environmental. Indeed, many businesses can overcome extreme transgressions without major stigmas, not to mention the cancellation of their operating licenses permitted by the broader society. But the question arises, why?

One answer to this question is that past transgressions are simply forgotten. Lange and Washburn (2012) have emphasized the importance of individual observer attributions in defining corporate irresponsibility. That individuals forget their attributions may thus in part explain why past irresponsibility does not lead to stigmas. Mena et al. (2015) have taken this line of inquiry further. They argue that forgetting of corporate irresponsibility is not only a matter of individuals not remembering past events, but about promoting forgetting in collective memory. The authors identify that firms engage in a variety of deliberate activities in order to manipulate the memory of past irresponsibility. The authors called such activities “forgetting work”, where the aim is to deinstitutionalize collective memories that are in place or in the process of forming, or to (re)configure existing collective memories. They highlight three key activities of forgetting work: manipulation of the immediate corporate irresponsibility event, silencing of stakeholders, and undermining of mnemonic traces of the event over time. Although we agree with Mena et al. (2015) that forgetting of corporate transgressions can play an important role in maintaining the legitimacy and reputation of a firm, we also argue that the authors fail to sufficiently emphasize another aspect of collective memory in relation to corporate irresponsibility. That is, collective memory can be also used to manipulate the conceptions of how irresponsible past activities were, and more generally to manipulate the perceptions of how responsible and irresponsible the firm is at present. Understanding this aspect requires some further elaboration on the nature of collective memory and memory work.

Collective memory has been a central issue in social and political sciences for decades. Many modern investigations into collective memory owe to Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), whose works have been followed more recently in the so-called social memory studies (Olick, 1999; 2008; Olick & Robbins, 1998). Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory resides in social contexts and structures, and remembering is a central concern for every society. As such, remembering and forgetting are ultimately conducted in accordance to the frames and practices of memory in the groups they belong (Brockmeier, 2002; Zerubavel, 2003). Antze and Lambek (1996) argue that memory ought to be understood as “culturally mediated acts, schemata, and stories - - that comprise our memories, and the way we think about them” (p. 15). Brockmeier (2002) has further highlighted the selectiveness of collective memory, meaning there are always creates gaps, distortions, contradictions and other types of incoherence. Collective memory should be thought of as “a highly selective process which oscillates between remembering and forgetting” (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006, 109), which not only maintains the current social order, but it is also responsible for changing it. As Mena et al. (2015) correctly recognized, collective memory emphasizes the role of forgetting in mnemonic processes and that (selective) forgetting is one of the primary functions of memory (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006). However, collective memory is about reconfiguring not only the past but also the present: “by closing or ignoring gaps and omissions, it arranges new orders and creates new coherences” (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 22). In this sense, memory work can be used to manipulate the perceptions of corporate irresponsibility in the past, but it can be also mobilized to institute and reconfigure existing norms and attributions of corporate responsibility.

In order to address re-configuration of social orders through collective memory, close attention must be paid to issues of power. Various authors have highlighted the importance of power dynamics in defining collective memories. These studies have focused on attempts to institutionalize certain configurations of a collective memory, which are typically called *memory work* (Kuhn, 2010). Lebow, Kansteiner and Fogu (2006) highlight that processes of collective memory involve simultaneously dealing with what individuals think they remember about the past, and with attempts by different actors to influence interpretations of the past. The authors point to “efforts by political elites, their supporters, and their opponents to construct meaning of the past and propagate them more widely or impose them on other members of society” (Lebow et al, 2006, p. 13). That is to say, various agents around episodes and events that initiate the formation of collective memories will attempt to steer them into their desired shape and direction. Others have emphasized the dual nature of memory as power resource and

object of power struggles. Hirsch (1995) has argued that the control of memory as such represents a type of political power: persons in a position to manipulate memory, and with it the valued symbols of a society or group, hold political power. Antze and Lambek (1996) add that memory serves “both as a source of authority and as a means of attack” (p. 7). Ricoeur (2004, p. 448-452) has emphasized the role of narratives in discursive struggles in collective memory. For him, narratives are necessarily selective in nature, always configurations of memories, but never exhaustive. Ricoeur, too, stresses the importance of positions of power in narrativization:

The resource of narrative -- becomes a trap, when higher powers take over this emplotment and impose a canonical narrative by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery. A devious form of forgetting is at work here, resulting from stripping the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves. (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 448)

We expect firms to be in a key position of power when it comes to memory work over their past. They are likely to know the most about their past and to have the most authority to tell their own story, which means that they also have the best means to select, re-frame, re-interpret and perhaps even invent narratives over the past. It must be noted, however, that memory work occurs in political and institutional settings where other influences, many of them unpredictable or unforeseen, can help shape the consequences of their behavior and the ways in which debates evolve (see Verovsek, 2008). The influence that the work of interested actors can have on a collective memory is constrained by the institutional and cultural contexts and frames of interpretation in which they operate and in which the memory is located (Mistztal, 2003; Schudson, 1992). Czarniawska (2002) has argued that in order to be able to these change frames of interpretation, forgetting is necessary, and forgetting can be achieved through the effacement of institutional memory and its props, such as networks, associations, and information channels. This suggests an analysis of memory work requires specification on the context of the particular objects of memory work and further elaboration on the environment in which this memory work takes place.

Before going to the issue of memory work over corporate responsibility in more detail, it is worth noting that memory work has gained some attention in organizational and management studies during the last few years. Issues of collective memory have been studied especially in connection with somewhat modest but growing literature on organizational memory studies (OMS) (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; de Holan & Phillips, 2004; Foster et al., 2011; Rowlinson et al., 2009; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Sørensen, 2014). The focus of these studies has been mostly

on remembering and forgetting within organizations rather than on how organizations may shape their institutional environments by engaging in politics of collective memory. Only a few exceptions exist (see Mena et al., 2015). For instance, through their study on corporate museums, Nissley and Casey (2002) argue that organizations attempt to strategically influence the remembering of some issues and the forgetting of others. The authors posit that through the museums as sites of organizational memory, organizations engage in politics of remembering and politics of forgetting, manifested as internal struggles for the formation of organizational memory. A similar point is echoed in Rowlinson's (2002) account of Cadbury's telling of their own history both in the company's theme park Cadbury World and in the booklet Cadbury Story, in which the historically uncomfortable occasional connections to slave labor produced cocoa were left out of historical narratives. The author concluded that it is hardly surprising that firms prefer their histories unblemished and their reputation pristine, whatever skeletons there may be in some sealed away closets.

## **Memory work and institutions of corporate responsibility**

From the perspective of memory work, an approach to corporate responsibility has to be able to capture longer-term influences and developments. The best approach here is to study *institutions* of corporate responsibility because, institutions are, like memories, active social forces: they think, elaborate and profoundly influence the construction of social representations (Douglas, 1986). Institutional research of corporate responsibility has drawn heavily on new institutional theory of organizations (Brammer et al., 2012). One of the key insights in this research has been to take what Matten and Moon (2008) call 'implicit' CSR – the expectations towards businesses and social obligations that firms are expected to meet in different institutional environments – as its central research object in contrast to the 'explicit' CSR of management studies addressing voluntary corporate programs using the signifier of CSR. 'Implicit' CSR can be defined as all kinds of institutional mechanisms and sources that attribute social expectations to corporate activities and provide criteria for meeting these expectations (Sorsa, 2008). Such expectations arise from public and private regulation, nongovernmental and other independent organizations that monitor corporate behavior, informal norms and formal standards regarding appropriate corporate behavior, associative behavior among corporations, and organized dialogues among corporations and their stakeholders (Campbell,

2007). Institutional theory based has aimed to identify ‘alternative institutional frameworks to regulate the social consequences of business and to enable corporations to share in coordinated social responsibility’ (Matten & Moon, 2008, p. 420). Indeed, research based on institutional theory approaches to corporate responsibility has extensively discussed the relation between CSR and broader governance regimes (e.g. Brammer et al., 2012; Gond et al., 2011; Scherer et al., 2013).

Yet relatively little has been said about what determines the contents of corporate responsibilities in individual cases in different environments. Anttiroiko (2008) has separated two phases in the process in which macro-level social expectations become prevalent at the level of individual firm. Each of the two phases defines the contents and boundaries of the other for example through public debate and legal contestation, but each also has its own life. First, in analogy to taking responsibility and holding someone responsible (see Kutz, 2000), responsibility agendas – explicit definitions of social expectations and norms that apply to the individual organization – can be set by firms or imposed by external institutional channels, as has been described extensively by Campbell (2007). Which (and whose) social expectations are identified and recognized by firms and end up as agendas, depend on political struggles and relative power of mechanisms in which different expectations are embedded (Sorsa, 2008). Second, firms realize their responsibility by designing, formulating, and revising their activities to either prevent irresponsible behavior (proactive) or to answer the feedback they receive (reactive). This stage necessarily includes much sensemaking, interpretation, and translation to prevalent practices (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010). It is here that attributions and perceptions of (ir)responsibility come to play (e.g. Joutsenvirta, 2011; Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015; Lange & Washburn, 2012).

As argued in the previous section, memory work refers to a process in which different actors form series of competing narratives and attempt to establish accepted truths on the issue at hand. Memory work projects aim to institutionalize or reconfigure some narratives to benefit some interests. While memory provides positions of power as such, the ability institutionalize memory narratives is highly dependent on the contexts and environments in which they take place. These descriptions of memory work resonate well with the concept of institutional work, which has been highly influential in organization and management studies during the last decade or so (Lawrence et al., 2011). Institutional work refers to ‘the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). The notion depicts institutional actors as reflexive, goal-

oriented and capable, focuses on actors' actions as the center of institutional dynamics, and strives to capture structure, agency and their interrelations (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). Various forms of institutional work projects and actors participating in such measures have been recognized in recent research (see Lawrence et al., 2011). The notion captures all kinds of attempts to institute, negotiate, disrupt or resist institutions however informal, short or symbolic these attempts or the discursive struggles in which they are employed might be (Lawrence, 2008). Thus institutional work has provided institutional theory an improved ability to address contestation, conflict and resistance, and to address the intended as well as unintended consequences of institutional entrepreneurship (see Lawrence et al., 2009).

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) have identified a number of institutional work strategies for creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions. Creation includes overtly political mobilization to reshape regulative rules, property rights and boundaries that define access to material resources or hierarchical status (vesting, defining and advocacy), actions in which actors' belief systems are reconfigured with discursive practice (constructing identities, changing normative associations and constructing normative networks), and actions designed to associate new practices with existing ones (mimicry), elaborate chains of cause and effect (theorizing), and provide the skills or knowledge to support new institutions (educating). Maintenance includes creation of rule systems (enabling) or compliance practices (policing) to renew institutions or coercive barriers (detering) to suppress alternative institutional logics, as well as efforts to maintain institutions on reproducing existing norms and belief systems through narratives (valorizing/demonizing and mythologizing) and everyday routines (embedding and routinizing). Disruption includes attempts to disconnect rewards and sanctions from some set of practices, technologies or rules, to disassociate the practice, rule or technology from its moral foundation as appropriate within a specific cultural context, and to disrupt institutions by undermining their core assumptions and beliefs.

We argue that memory work relates to institutional work over corporate (ir)responsibility in two ways. First, institutionalized narratives over the past can be the *objects* of institutional work. The discussion above suggests that institutionalized conceptions of corporate irresponsibility can be manipulated by manipulating either the representations of norms that apply to all firms or single one, or by the perceptions of applicability of such norms. Second, narratives over the past can be constructed and mobilized by institutional entrepreneurs as a part of their institutional work *strategies*. Combining these two insights, we can recognize at least three types of memory work strategies with which perceptions of past irresponsibility can

be manipulated or mobilized to increase the legitimacy of firms at present (see Table 1). The first and perhaps the most straightforward type of strategy is to re-narrativize the past. This strategy can be used to shift blame (i.e. direct responsibility to other agents) or to question past normative environments as such or on basis of hindsight. The second, subtler and more symbolic type of memory work strategy is to disconnect the past from the present. This strategy can be employed tactically to question the validity of past accountability claims and thus to potentially undermine their current legitimacy. However, it can also include attempts to undermine the relevance of past norms in the present context or even concrete attempts to control access to information on the past. The last type of strategy is the direct mobilization of the past to the current context. This includes various institutional work tactics ranging from mostly symbolic practices like the internalization of past norms as current symbolic values or relativization of current activities to longer-term track records to highly concrete means like provision of blame shifting strategies and resurrections of past advocacy coalitions.

<i>Memory work strategy</i>	<i>Types of institutional work projects</i>	<i>Example tactics for influencing applicability of CSR norms to individual firms</i>	<i>Example tactics for undermining CSR norms</i>
<b>(Re-)narrativizing the past</b>	Defining Constructing identities Theorizing Valourizing/demonizing Mythologizing Undermining assumptions and beliefs	Blame shifting via alternative causal descriptions or disassociation from past events Generalization of particular events (e.g. herd behaviour)	Mythologization and normalization of past norms Alternative formulations, reinterpretations or refutations of past expectations and beliefs in hindsight
<b>Disconnecting the past from present</b>	Changing normative associations Disconnecting sanctions Disassociating moral foundations Deterring	Appeal to change of mandate, formal identity (e.g. M&A) or personnel Closure of accountability processes (e.g. court processes)	Claiming social expectations or their cultural contexts outdated Controlling access to information on past events
<b>(Re-)mobilizing the past</b>	Advocacy Vesting Constructing normative networks Enabling work	Relativization of events with track records (e.g. compliance) Education and embedding of	Resurrecting past compromises and normative coalitions Internalizing external expectations as symbolic



	Policing Educating Embedding/routinizing	ignorance/blame shifting strategies	organizational or peer group values
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Table 1. Memory work strategies for manipulating perceptions of corporate responsibility

Of course, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on various institutional factors. For example, discursive struggles in court hearings and in pages of newspapers are likely to differ in how they affect further responsibility agendas (Anttiroiko, 2008). As Antze and Lambek (1996) argue, cases of litigation are rather unique spaces for politics of memory, as they entail attempts at extracting matters of fact from memories. While these processes may produce very tangible and visible changes to prevailing responsibility norms (e.g. back up some expectations with ability to sanction non-compliance), their usage may lead to mostly symbolic victories in more general public debate. Indeed, the strategies outlined above are not meant to be read as hypotheses on *how* they are employed. They are meant only to establish thematic domains through which invoking of narratives of corporate past can shape institutional frameworks of corporate responsibility. Who adopts what kinds of discursive strategies in invoking memory, what kind of more specific tactics there might be, how exactly memory is invoked (as remembering or forgetting), what kinds of expectations and institutions come to be contested, and which strategies emerge as winners in these struggles are matters of empirical enquiry. Evidently, all these issues need to be addressed in more detail in further empirical enquiries. In the following section, however, we will shed light on one particular issue, i.e. whether corporations have adopted these strategies after events of unforgivable irresponsibility.

## **Forgetting the unforgivable: how businesses promote institutional forgetting of corporate irresponsibility**

In the following analysis, we will raise examples of how firms have adopted memory work strategies to manipulate the perceptions of their past irresponsibility in order to benefit of their present in cases which we call *unforgivable corporate irresponsibility*. By such cases, we refer to corporate actions that produced harm that cannot be reversed, and whose atonement is dependent on stakeholders' consent. There are three criteria for such actions. First, the actions have done some kind of tangible and permanent social, financial or environmental harm, which

can be at best compensated, not reversed. For example, the destruction of local livelihoods in the BP oil spill or the degradation of living habitats in the Niger delta can be considered such actions: even though the livelihoods can be eventually at least partially restored, the lives of those affected by the harm may have been permanently changed. Second, the harm must have been made intentionally to serve the interest of the corporation. Besides direct actions, this includes cases in which adverse effects are recognized but intentionally ignored, and cases in which harm is the product of documented negligence by corporate managers (e.g. lack of appropriate risk management procedures for risks recognized in activities). Third, the corporation has to be institutionally confirmed as a subject responsible for its actions. The confirmation can be in internal (i.e. corporation takes responsibility for its actions ad hoc or post hoc) or external (e.g., a firm has been determined responsible for its actions by a court, a firm has been called into account by stakeholders for its activities with demonstrated evidence for the effects of its actions).

Cases of unforgivable irresponsibility are highly relevant cases for studying memory work on corporate responsibility. In such cases, firms cannot decide when their transgressions becomes compensated and retributed for in full – only those who have suffered can do that. Firms cannot thus control when stigmas are healed or when contestation becomes illegitimate. The only way to manage the situation is to contest the narratives over the irresponsible actions to shift blame and/or to mobilize alternative narratives to influence existing norms. To be manageable doesn't imply that manipulation is necessarily successful. Too manipulative strategies might become regarded as what Antze and Lambek (1996) call 'attacks' without the necessary source of authority, which may even further undermine the legitimacy of corporate activities. Indeed, if the goal of a justification strategy is simply to escape accountability with whitewashing, such strategies may be perceived to have detrimental effects to democratic societies (see e.g. Banerjee, 2007). In this section, we will interpret a selected sample of relatively well-known corporate actions and events, which both fulfill the criteria for unforgivable responsibilities and illustrate different memory work strategies described above. Being based on a sample, the purpose of this analysis is not to provide any generalizable information on how or how often corporations employ these strategies. Rather, the purpose of the analysis is to demonstrate that businesses *have* employed these strategies and further research is warranted.

### ***Re-narrativization of the past***

Corporate history is rife with examples of corporate irresponsibility in which the corporation has engaged in unidirectional **blame shifting** (with varying success, and mostly in cases including potentially heavy financial sanctions) to some other party such as subcontractors, government agencies, or local communities (e.g. Banerjee, 2007, 55). A relatively well-documented example involves the long-standing presence of Shell in the Niger Delta, where civil society organizations have launched a number of challenges to Shell for more or less permanent environmental damages (among a plethora of other issues, which might be considered “unforgivable”) caused by oil spills from pipelines. According to Vanguard News (2011), Shell previously attributed 98 % of the oil spills to sabotage by locals (under Nigerian law, Shell could not be considered liable for damages resulted from sabotage), effectively unburdening itself of any responsibility. However, after having been put under pressure at a 2011 hearing in the Dutch Parliament, the company representatives backtracked the estimate to 70 %. Albeit a highly symbolic measure, the strategy to shift a certain share of the blame aims not only to responsabilize another party, but also shift blame to illegitimate actions (sabotage). By doing this, the corporation may also generate uncertainty concerning memories on who exactly made the ‘unforgivable’ decisions in the past and thus to provide room for historical interpretations that the corporation itself has been more prudent than irresponsible. Employment of similar tactics can be found also in case of struggles between Latin American pulp industry and local social movements (see Kröger & Nylund, 2012, 79).

Blame shifting may also serve as a key theme in discursive struggles between various parties involved in past irresponsibility. One well-documented example of multidirectional blame shifting is the widely reported BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The case is a rich source for disclosing strategies of re-narrativization of the past, in which blame shifting was used on many occasions by several implicated firms. First, BP released a 2010 report where it attributed part of the blame for the incident to the oilrig owner, Transocean, and to a contractor, Halliburton. While Transocean and Halliburton both responded by putting all the blame on BP, a 2011 report by presidential oil spill commission attributed the blame on all three firms. The report found “flaws in BP’s management and design procedures, as well as poor communication between BP and Halliburton.” (National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, 2011, 116) and argued that “BP, Halliburton, and Transocean did not adequately identify or address risks of an accident“(223), among other allegations. Halliburton immediately and vehemently criticized the report, but curiously later (in 2013) admitted guilt to concealment and destruction of evidence in connection to an investigation of the oil spill,

thus creating suspicions on the company's role in the actual incident. In this case, as in the previous one, the strategy is employed so that it first distributes responsibility over transgressions to various actors, but then takes responsibility only on some "more forgivable" actions of the past. In other words, businesses can promote institutional forgetting of worst irresponsibilities by promoting institutional remembering of lesser irresponsibility. However, Halliburton's act of concealing and destructing evidence also serves as an example of another strategy, that of controlling access to information on past events, which may influence responsibility norms more broadly.

Another tactic for influencing the applicability of CSR norms through re-narrativization is **generalization of past events**. Besides the somewhat simpler issue of shifting blame to environmental factors or exceptional circumstances (e.g. financial booms), this tactic includes what Paul Ricoeur (2004, 440) calls 'forgetting by persistence', in which an event that may be shocking, or against current norms, is repeated so often or by so many actors that it becomes common and expected. Such tactics are feasible for industries that are generally considered dangerous for workers, such as extractive industries. After a recent Chevron gas well explosion in Pennsylvania – which mostly attracted attention due to the energy firm offering pizza vouchers to the local community for the general inconveniences of having a gas well in the near vicinity – in which one worker was killed, one former coal worker stated in an interview that "we have dangerous occupations. You try to do everything right, but one little slip up can wreak real havoc -- [b]ut sometimes it's something you just have to put up with" (Schlanger, 2014). This statement provides one possible way to employ this memory work strategy. An unforgivable irresponsibility can be represented as an industry-wide or professional issue instead of a specific corporate policy, which promotes institutional remembering of regulators' or workers' responsibilities and thus indirectly promotes the institutional forgetting of individual corporations' decisions. Moreover, externalities as severe as death may remain relatively unchecked due to an insistence that work-related death and accidents have always been a part of the business. This tactic can be also effectively used in combination with internalizing broader occupational safety norms as symbolic values.

The international financial crisis of 2008-09 provides various examples on how **normalization of past norms** can be used to justify activities (see Brassett et al., 2010). One of the contested aspects of the crisis was the initiation of the sub-prime mortgage meltdown. Under pressure from various stakeholders as the main culprit of the crisis, Wall Street concocted an explanation

of their own, dubbed “the Big Lie” by Washington Post’s Barry Ritholtz (Ritholtz, 2011). This explanation was, roughly put, that the Congress was to blame for the expectations towards sub-prime lenders, as their housing policy in essence forced financial firms to engage in predatory lending, as giving mortgages came to be seen almost as a social service. In other words, expectations that come from individual borrowers were generalized by the financial industry as broader societal norms. Such a move provides a historical narrative in which such expectations could not have been avoided. As was demonstrated by Ritholtz and various other reactions, this kind of narrative was not perhaps accepted by everyone, but it nevertheless shifted much political attention to the systemic qualities (or in other words, irresponsibilities) of sub-prime lending (which is echoed e.g. in Langley, 2008).

### ***Disconnecting the past from the present***

The strategy of disconnecting the past from the present has been extensively addressed in studies on collective memory. For example, Assmann (1995; cited in Brockmeier, 2002) discusses a number of strategies including ‘structural amnesia’, which refers to the forgetting of those elements of the past that are no longer considered meaningfully related to the present, and ‘the willful destruction of commemorative symbols’, which refers to something akin to the destruction of documents in George Orwell’s 1984. By cutting off links to the past, possibly complemented with manipulation or even fabrication of evidence of bygone events, or just rendering past events and norms irrelevant in terms of present contexts, it is possible to significantly influence the landscape of collective memory. We argue that these kinds of strategies can be used tactically to influence the applicability of CSR norms through appealing to change of mandate, formal identity or personnel, or closure of accountability processes such as court processes, and the logics of responsibility norms by claiming social expectations connected to some event outdated or by controlling access to information on past events.

**Changes of corporate mandate, identity, or personnel** are at times considered to lead to release from accusations and allegations and subsequent reinforcement of legitimacy. For example, major scandals often trigger change of executive personnel, including CEOs (albeit that in some cases this may be a symbolic gesture in order to signal stakeholders that the responsibility resides on top). Perhaps a more profound tactic is to appeal to a change in formal authority over the firm, which could follow from a merger or acquisition (the transfer of Union Carbide under Dow Chemicals would be an interesting case study, given the Bhopal disaster)

or from an establishment of a subsidiary. A recent example of such appeal would be the Swiss investment bank Credit Suisse's attempts at dodging US legal authorities by founding a subsidiary in the United States to take the brunt of the sanctions following accusations of assisting thousands of US clients to evade taxes (BBC, 2014; Yahoo! Finance, 2014). The bank's scheme failed, however, as the judges reportedly balked at Credit Suisse's proposition for more modest guilty pleas from the recently formed subsidiary, citing wider societal concerns. For example, if successful, this switch of "ownership" of responsibility would have arguably made it far easier for Credit Suisse to save its face while its subsidiary could have been claimed to have gone rogue. This tactic may be thus used to ring-fence the 'unforgivable' decision to a specified entity and time while keeping the historical appeal of broader company group more prudent. Of course, it must be noted that memory work strategy is not the same as intentional change in corporate structures. For example, sometimes the change of formal authority may be (at least seemingly) an unintended coincidence, such as in the case of consulting firm Accenture, which conveniently split from Arthur Andersen not long before the Enron debacle that brought down Arthur Andersen.

Perhaps the most typical examples of **closure of accountability processes** are related to court settlements, particularly if court proceedings are proclaimed secret (albeit that court proceedings may be held secret in cases where settlement is not reached). Shell has been involved in a number of court cases, some of them prolonged, which provide examples of this tactic. In a long-standing legal dispute between the family of executed activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and Shell, after 12 years of petitioning the court not to hear several lawsuits against the company (including complicity in human rights abuses against the Ogoni people, such as execution, assault, and crimes against humanity), Shell agreed to settle out of court. Notably, as part of the settlement deal Shell denied any involvement in any of the alleged wrongdoings, and claiming it was a humanitarian gesture while accepting that violence took place and suffering was involved (BBC, 2009). Irrespective of what may or may not have transpired in relation to the Ogoni violence, Shell's widely reported insistence on non-culpability in any of the allegations and the charitable nature of the settlement was a direct attempt at influencing the collectively constructed images of past events, while the closure brought by the deal to a long-standing court case relieves the firm from a potentially large amount of continuing exposure to doubts concerning Ogoni violence. The company can thus undermine current expectations by arguing that responses related to these expectations have been already settled by the court in the past.

When faced with allegations of wrongful behavior, one response that appears relatively easy to justify in the contemporary world of fast-paced change is **claiming social expectations or their cultural contexts are outdated**. One recent large-scale event that evoked this tactic was the Snowden leaks, which implicated a number of tech corporations, including Google, in a scandal involving information flows between tech firms and national security services. In the wake of the (still ongoing) scandal, Google dismissed an incoming data-mining lawsuit by stating that people cannot legitimately expect privacy in information sent through email, just as a sender of a business letter could not expect the recipient's secretary to reading the letter before the recipient (CNET, 2013). Clumsy analogies aside, here Google attempted to legitimize their behavior in face of current expectations by appealing to changed norms in a brave new world, one in which old expectations of privacy (that would pertain to traditional mail) do not hold.

One of the most tangible ways to disconnect the past from the present is to **control access to information on past norms and events**. For Ricoeur (2004), destruction of written memory traces i.e. texts and documents is a form of abusive forgetting that also leads to collective forgetting (see Mena et al., 2015). In case of past corporate irresponsibilities, destroying evidence appears to be a tempting route to take. We have already mentioned a few cases of destruction of evidence above: Halliburton's destruction of evidence of their culpability in connection to the BP oil spill and Credit Suisse's destruction of evidence of their involvement in helping their American customers to evade or at least avoid taxes. A third example is the phone hacking scandal that occurred with the media organization News of the World, in which the company went to significant lengths to cover up any wrongdoing on its part prior to investigations, as reported by the Guardian (2012). However, it must be noted that all these cases are about businesses destroying concrete evidence about events and thus more about applicability of responsibility norms, not about businesses concealing norms and expectations they face, which might influence CSR norms rather than their applicability. The example of Google's – and even more to the point that of a few teleoperators, which revealed their connections to security agencies in June 2014 (Garside, 2014) – cooperation with security agencies serves as an example of such activity: the company did not inform its customers about the norms security services had set for its activities for years. By doing this, the company can for example provide a rather pleasant view on its normative environment as one, in which all stakeholder concerns might have been somewhat equal instead of the actual one, in which some public security agencies have dictated much of the hierarchy of different expectations. As demonstrated by these examples, controlling access to information on past norms and events

can be used to both influence the applicability of responsibility norms as well as the norms themselves.

### ***Mobilizing the past***

In the face of a scandal, corporations with particularly solid (perceived) track records in one or another area have been known to attempt to **relativize particular events with their track records**. For instance, when Japan-based automobile giant Toyota was forced to recall millions of vehicles due to safety problems (related to accelerator pedals and floor mat positioning, among other issues) that had led to several traffic accidents and deaths, the corporation was quick to note that the public attacks against the company were unfair, and that it had a “well-earned reputation for integrity” (Toyota, 2009). The company also appealed to the firm’s solid track record in identifying and responding to safety issues (Toyota Canada, 2009). Here, the firm was reassuring its stakeholders that everything was in order in the firm as usual and that these incidents were just a glitch, albeit an ‘unforgivable’ one, that was to be dealt with as usual.

A number of **education and embedding of ignorance or blame shifting strategies** have been also noticed in academic literature. In connection to DDT, Maguire & Hardy (2009) discussed various ‘defensive institutional work’ strategies, which could be also adopted as lobbying or PR practices. Specifically, in that example members of the chemical industry attempting to defend the legitimacy of DDT produced a considerable number of their own texts in an attempt to ‘educate’ the wider population as well as policy makers (Maguire & Hardy, *ibid.*, 169). In effect, the chemical industry was attempting to embed ignorance of the harmful effects of DDT, refuting the past evidence provided by Carson (1962) and thus attempting to reconfigure those memories concerning DDT.

Corporations may also **evoke past compromises or old normative coalitions**. Such a tactic has been used in connection to unforgivable irresponsibilities, as illustrated by a scandal-within-scandal in a Finnish mining debacle that has been going on for years. The Finnish mining company Talvivaara (which is also the name of the mine in question) had been mired amidst an environmental disaster for several months when its CEO, founder, and majority owner Pekka Perä was interviewed on the environmental damage the firm was continuously causing. When asked about the company’s troubles at the time, Perä provided the following response: “I still



say that Talvivaara has a significant role in Kainuu [the region in question]. No one can deny that Talvivaara has been the most influential factor in the Kainuu miracle [of growth in economy and employment]. It appears to have been forgotten what has *really* been achieved” (Talouselämä 2012, emphasis ours). Here, CEO Perä invoked a past normative coalition, which was formed in conditions before large-scale environmental damages, to affirm that the firm should be considered legitimate even though damage was done after since. Perä also played down environmental problems by appealing to the economic gains that were still there, or, in other words, thus provided an alternative historical narrative to that of ongoing environmental disaster, which had started to take hold in Finland at the time. In this sense, the company promoted institutional forgetting of environmentally relevant expectations, while shifting attention to broad coalitions whose expectations have been met.

The tactic of **internalizing external expectations as organizational or peer group values** refers primarily to cases in which broad allegations or tangible demands by stakeholders are internalized as (symbolic) responsibilities by individual firms or attributed to industry standards or similar sources. This strategy enables corporations to mediate expectations and thus to promote their own interpretations of responsibility norms in the public domain. Memory work tactics can play an important part in this strategy. These tactics can be used in cooperation by various corporations or alone by individual corporations (perhaps even against their rivals). The former can be argued to be a central issue in the ‘regulatory captures’ often associated with ‘explicit’ CSR (e.g. Barley, 2007). As an example, after the Foxconn suicide debacle, Apple launched a campaign to improve the working conditions of its supplier (Oremus, 2012). As another instance, we may once again turn to the BP oil spill, in which the company engaged in a large-scale campaign to assure its stakeholders, including the general population, that the firm is doing everything in its power to both stop the spill – NBC (2010) reported that the firm went as far as to set up a call line for tips from the public, which went on to receive 92,000 phone calls – and also get to the heart of the problems and prevent any such problems in the future. However, BP has since continued to receive critique in the public arena for both its efforts in the clean up as well as its safety operations concerning other platforms; for example, the Guardian (2013) reported that the BP had recently been blamed by Norwegian authorities for poor maintenance and serious regulation breaches in a more minor leak in the North Sea.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we have argued that collective memory is an intrinsic feature of all societal and institutional structures, and an important political space for defining authority and creating new social orders. We have argued that research addressing how memory work over past corporate irresponsibility affects the current responsibility norms and perceptions of corporate (ir)responsibility has been lacking. The purpose of this conceptual paper has been to start filling this research gap by first identifying how collective remembering or forgetting can influence CSR norms and then by demonstrating how collective memory has been mobilized by corporations to promote institutional forgetting of past irresponsibilities. We have argued that businesses, as well as other agents in politics of collective memory, can employ three memory work strategies in institutional work projects over CSR norms: re-narrativization of the past, disconnecting the past from the present, and direct mobilization of institutional forces of the past in the present context. These strategies can be employed tactically to maintain, change, or disrupt the institutional logics of corporate responsibility norms or the applicability of these norms to particular events and actions. We have also demonstrated how businesses have employed these strategies in order to overcome major transgressions, which we called cases of unforgivable irresponsibility. Our sample illustrations demonstrated that individual attempts to promote institutional forgetting seem to include employment of various strategies at the same time. This calls for more systematic empirical research as well as theoretical reflections on how different strategies can be combined.

These findings are an important contribution to work on memory and organizations (Rowlinson et al., 2010), as they deepen our understanding on the specific ways in which organizations attempt to alter collective memories of their irresponsibility, but also how they use memories as a resource to improve their own position following irresponsibility. Mena and colleagues (2015) have already taken the first steps in this endeavor, but outlining the specific memory work strategies and tactics that firms use, we believe we have taken the necessary step for enabling serious empirical investigations of memory work in practice.

As a second major point, by outlining these strategies of memory work and demonstrating how they can be used to influence institutions related to corporate irresponsibility, we have begun uncovering the potential importance of memory work over how institutions change (or are

changed) and endure over time. What is notable here is that this influence of memory work is not only performed within an individual institution, such as a business corporation (something which has been pointed out by Anteby & Molnar, 2012), but that this can also have sway over a wide variety of institutions around the actor conducting the memory work. This way, we are also furthering the understanding of the connections between collective memory and the construction of institutions, something which has been noted before by a variety of authors (e.g. Douglas, 1986, 70; Misztal, 2003).

On the basis of our discussion, we can propose some research agendas for further empirical research and theory building. First, much more systematic analyses on the nature and significance of remembering *and* forgetting work over irresponsible *and* responsible corporate behavior in different contexts is needed in order to provide a more holistic conception of politics of collective memory in context of CSR. For instance, if memory work over irresponsible corporate behavior makes Iron Law of Responsibility (Davis, 1973) altogether obsolete, further research is certainly warranted. This takes us to the second agenda: more comprehensive and broader empirical enquiries as well as comparative in-depth case analyses on a variety of issues concerning memory work strategies are needed. Most importantly, we need to better understand what kinds of *tactics* there are and how different actors employ them in discursive struggles in different circumstances. Our sample analysis shed light on some themes that ought to be addressed in these two fields of enquiry. In order for studies on the memory work over corporate (ir)responsibility to advance, this development work ought to be started sooner rather than later. Lastly, we observed that research on the politics of ‘implicit’ CSR in case of individual firms is still underdeveloped in order to provide a holistic understanding on what kinds of institutions and norms become the objects of memory work. This suggests that in-depth analyses on memory work over corporate (ir)responsibility can also shed light on the micro-level politics of corporate responsibility more generally.

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# Publication 3

**Rintamäki, Jukka. Unpublished essay.**

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# Manufactured memory: Memory work and resistance concerning the public past of an organization

## ABSTRACT

An organization's past determines how we view that organization. But can we really trust publicly shared organizational pasts? Who gets to decide them? In this paper, I investigate the struggle for the collective memory of a former IT start-up; the ways in which powerful representatives of the former firm attempted to concoct a shared memory of the organization, and how former members of the organization attempted to resist such efforts. I illustrate that it is indeed possible for a powerful actor to manufacture a publicly shared collective memory of an organization, and highlight ways in which other actors – namely, former employees – attempted to resist the formation of such a memory. The study has implications for researchers and practitioners.

## Introduction

Typically, memories of past organizational irresponsibility or mistakes are treated as something worth remembering so that such mistakes are not repeated (Mena, Rintamäki, Spicer & Fleming, 2015). Certainly this is true for the society affected by such mistakes, but to a large extent for the organization itself as well. But what about the individuals involved; namely, the employees of the culpable organization? Likely for many individuals, the opposite is true: the faster such ordeals are forgotten, the easier it is to get rid of a stigmatizing reputation for having taken part in illegitimate activities or events. Certainly this is particularly true when the notion of irresponsibility is contested by these individuals. Forgetting becomes a boon. The extreme case of Upstart doffers an exciting, revealing lens on struggles of collective memory on a bygone, almost forgotten past that has deeply impacted those who were there during Upstart's rise and fall, and have had to live under the shadow of the memory that was imposed on them.

Upstart was an international Nordic IT firm during the original dotcom bubble, established in 2000. During its two-year existence in the early 00's it garnered international fame by way of some very lucrative global licensing deals of such magnitude that similar deals have not been seen since in the Nordics. Fame soon turned to infamy, however, as the company, after tumultuous times and some controversial rumors, filed for bankruptcy in 2002 after burning through \$21.5 million of venture capital and an undisclosed amount of debt.

From the standpoint of collective memory, perhaps the most interesting facet in the case of Upstart is that after a few years of going bankrupt, some of the company founders and other members made a film documentary about Upstart. It put forth a rather spectacular, scandalous account of what transpired, weaving a story involving lying to investors and clients, extravagant spending on firm premises (and all sorts of debauchery performed at the premises), spending firm money on alcohol, drugs, strippers, and prostitutes, constant partying, with one of the founders going as far as to compare founding and running the firm to performing a bank robbery. The documentary received a fair amount of publicity, especially within the industry, and was noted by the media. Very quickly the documentary turned the former firm into a minor national celebrity (albeit of a dubious reputation), thus also determining the collective memory that industry members and even the public at large would have of the firm and its employees.

That firm management tend to attempt to influence the histories that are told about the companies they represent is a well-documented phenomenon (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Rowlinson, 2002). This can be done through narrative efforts in storytelling (Gabriel, 2001) or through more material efforts, such as corporate museums (Nissley & Casey, 2002) or architecture (Decker, 2014). What is less well known is how exactly (shared) memories of corporate pasts are reconfigured, what types of actors are involved, and what types of struggles emerge in such reconfiguration processes. Though memory in organizations has received its share of treatment as a capability (Walsh & Ungson, 1991; Spender, 1996; De Holan & Philips, 2004) theories on collective memory have lately begun receiving some attention, too. As noted by Mena et al., (2015) in a conceptualization of forgetting of corporate irresponsibility events, although the construction and maintenance of past memories in organizations has been studied in the form of material traces such as archives and museums (Decker, 2014; Foster, Suddaby, Minkus & Wiebe, 2011; Nissley & Casey, 2002), studies on how memories are sustained and changed through symbolic traces such as narratives, have been less popular (although some exceptions exist, such as Adoriso, 2014). Mena and colleagues (2015) also point out the need for examples of how forgetting

occurs among stakeholder groups - such as employees of an organization - in practice. The authors also stress the contested nature of how past corporate events are remembered and forgotten; some actors are typically willing to forget certain facets of past events, while others want them preserved or emphasized. With the aforementioned issues in mind, I set out with the following research question: *Who gets to control the process of (re)configuration of collective memories over corporate pasts, what forms do the struggles involved take, and what types of actors partake in such struggles?*

With this study, through stories and narratives, I seek to provide understanding on how an event framed as that of irresponsibility is remembered and forgotten over time, and how the (collective) memories of the actors involved are constructed years after the event itself. Through the revelatory case of Upstart, we witness a memory struggle involving mnemonic communities that consist of former members of the now-dead organization as well as the wider society. Some founders of Upstart manufacture a collective memory through memory work – an attempt at institutionalizing a particular version of past events – which is then resisted by many members of the organization. This struggle illuminates the selective and political nature of collective memory, which allows for reinterpretation and reconfiguration of past events. Such reconfiguration may have considerable consequences for various parties, such as anxiety or stigmatization. In order to combat these consequences, various forms of resistance were taken up by former Upstarters. The aim with this is to advance theory and understanding on the forgetting of events of corporate irresponsibility. I will start the investigation by reviewing relevant literature on collective memory and organizations, after which I will proceed to describe the narrative storytelling approach along with the data. Next I will narrate the generally accepted, dominant collective memory and contrast it with competing memories. Following that, I will discuss the memory struggle that took place afterwards, in particular focusing on the forms of resistance that former Upstarters took to resist the memory work conducted through the documentary. Finally, I will outline a number of conclusions, discuss limitations, and draw out directions for potential future research.

## **Memory and organizations**

Although memory has been the object and lens of study in organization research for quite some time now (Walsh & Ungson, 1991), it has still been largely overlooked in organization studies despite the recent increase in interest (for a review, see Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye & Procter, 2010). As Rowlinson and colleagues (*ibid.*) point out, in organization studies memory is typically treated as database into which information can be stored and from which it can be retrieved at will, while the view of memory as an outcome of processes

of remembering and forgetting are neglected (Anteby & Molnar, 2012). While viewing memory as such as static capability may have its uses for certain analytical purposes, it fails to appreciate the dynamic, fluctuating nature of memory as a constantly negotiated and renegotiated process. And as Blaschke & Schoeneborn (2006) point out, another serious flaw in this sort of thinking is that it takes remembering for granted, treating it as the primary function of memory. The authors, leaning on Luhmann (1996), attest that forgetting is in fact the default function of memory rather than remembering. The literature on collective memory supports this notion, with the assertions of memory as selective, unreliable, context-reliant, prone to manipulation, and so on (Misztal, 2003; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Zerubavel, 1996).

Furthermore, the focus in organizational memory studies (OMS) has been largely in the organization itself rather than in the individuals working in these organizations or the wider society in which they operate, and how these interact with each other (Rowlinson, 2010; Adoriso, 2014; for an exception, see Mena et al., forthcoming). The focus of these studies has generally been on the instrumental value of memory in organization i.e. how it leads to some desired outcomes such as learning or profitability (Spender, 1996; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). It should be noted, however, that some forms of material traces of memory in organizations have started to receive attention lately. Rowlinson (2002) has investigated the construction of corporate history of Cadbury's through their brand museum and official historical accounts, while Nissley & Casey (2006) have examined the varieties of strategic use of memory through corporate museums. Meanwhile, Decker (2014) has studied the role organizational remembering in shaping meanings associated with architecture and physical spaces. To address the issues of a static conceptualization of memory and the accompanied focus on its instrumental value, some authors (Adoriso, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2010) have suggested turning to studies on collective memory, sometimes referred to as social memory studies.

The modern notion of collective memory was originated by Maurice Halbwachs (1992), and it has since grown into a relatively modest but growing literature known as social memory studies (see Olick, 2008; Olick & Robbins, 1998). A central concern in studies on collective memory is the way the past is (re)constructed in the present through present beliefs, norms, and values. Collective memory is thus seen as an active process that is socially constructed and that constantly unfolds over time (Olick & Robbins, 1998). Although it is generally recognized that remembering and forgetting are individual processes at the grass root level, our individual memories draw heavily on the social frameworks of memory that are dominant in the time and context in question. It should be pointed out that collective memory is not an

aggregated mass of individual memories, but rather it consists of shared representations of past events, dictated by social frameworks of memory (Olick, 1999).

As collective memory can be and often is contested, and as it is by nature selective and unfolds over time, there has been some debate over what are the actual drivers behind the development of collective memories. Schudson (1992, 53-56) makes a distinction between an idea that collective memory is primarily actively driven by interests, and a notion that collective memory is chiefly determined by cultural inertia, that in each society there is a cultural system consisting of norms, values, artifacts, and so on, which determines the way stories are told, and thus the way collective memory plays out in the long run. Several commenters have noted that likely there is some truth to both perspectives, and both have a role to play in the formation and configuration of collective memory (Misztal, 2003, 68). As Misztal (*ibid.*, 68-69) remarks, past events limit the amount of available interpretations of the past, as especially the importance and impact of traumatic events commit people to remember them. We see this in the case of *Upstart*, as for former *Upstarters* the contrast between the film and their perceived realities is still starkly remembered. However, for the wider audience no such contrast exists, but only the story of the documentary, and so manipulation of their memory has much more potential. This way, while I recognize the importance of cultural frames for the unfolding of collective memories, in this paper I underline the impact that interests may have on memory.

Despite its processual, temporal nature, it should be kept in mind that collective memory is multiple by definition: there are as many memories as there are groups (Misztal, 2003, 51). Groups that form around memories are called mnemonic communities. They vary in scale and scope; a mnemonic community may be a nation, an ethnic group, a family, or for example, an organization. Misztal (*ibid.*, 160) describes mnemonic communities as “groups that socialize us to what should be remembered and what should be forgotten” that also “provide the social contexts in which memories are embedded and mark the emotional tone, depth and style of our remembering”. In other words, it is mnemonic communities that engage in the mnemonic struggles that determine the evolution of collective memories (Zerubavel, 1996) alongside the cultural constraints amongst which these mnemonic communities operate. As Mena et al. (2015) have suggested, these types of mnemonic struggles are waged through what can be called memory work. Memory work involves attempts at institutionalizing a certain collective memory of the past (Mena et al., 2015). There are two subcategories to memory work: forgetting work (Mena et al., *ibid.*) and remembering work (Kuhn, 2010). Forgetting work refers to deliberate attempts at reconfiguring collective memories for a result favorable for interested parties. Such work may



be conducted through manipulating, silencing, and undermining of mnemonic traces typically involve, for example, some mnemonic community pushing a certain memory, while another community may be attempting to uphold a different version of the story. Through forgetting work, but also through cultural processes, mnemonic communities may fragment and fluctuate in size, and as recounted above, the collective memories themselves change with the passing of time.

As opposed to forgetting work, mnemonic communities may also engage in remembering work, which is an active practice of remembering that involves the interrogation of mnemonic traces, such as a film as a material form of collective memory, for “non- overt/non-obvious meanings, producing ‘counter-memories’” (Kuhn, 2010, 303). Remembering work does not assume transparency or authenticity of memories, but rather treats them as material for interrogation and interpretation. Like forgetting work, remembering work is always purposeful. But whereas the purpose of forgetting work is to manipulate and obscure, the purpose of remembering work is to question and illuminate.

Within and through mnemonic communities, collective memories manifest and are passed on in the form of stories and narratives (Decker, 2014). Brockmeier (2002) states that most memory practices in fact *are* narrative practices. Not only that, but narrative also gives shape to the temporal dimension of the human experience; it enables us to take a historical perspective to our lives. Citing Carrithers (1992), Brockmeier (*ibid.*, 27) notes that narrative does not consist only of telling stories, but it also involves “complex nets of actions and events”. Narrative approaches to memory have also started receiving attention in organization studies, where organizational memory has been conceptualized as narratives by Adorisio (2014). In a related fashion, Mena et al. (2015) emphasize the role of narratives in the active efforts that firms take to influence the collective memory of an event of corporate irresponsibility. But how exactly narratives are utilized in order to configure collective memories of organizational pasts in desired ways is not terribly well understood. The same can be said of the ways in which narratives are used in mnemonic struggles by different actors over collective memories of organizations. Collective memory of a firm is, after all, closely related to the reputation of a firm (Fine, 2012), and thus to an extent determines the way both a firm and its (former) employees are perceived by stakeholders over time. Overglorification or stigmatization of former employees are both possible outcomes memory work, yet to what extent the employees themselves have influence over such outcomes is poorly understood.

To address such issues, I will next introduce the case of Upstart. It is an extreme case of memory work and mnemonic struggles, where a few founders of a bankrupt firm managed to manufacture a collective memory through a documentary and reinforcing media materials. The employees, who felt affected by this manufacturing of a collective memory, attempted to resist, but to little avail, and eventually resigned to wait things out.

## The case

Upstart<sup>1</sup> was initially a highly successful IT firm based in the Nordics, the firm quickly attracted more than \$20 million of venture capital with the backing of highly prestigious global investment firms. Only, if the management group's own admissions are to be believed, that money was collected on empty promises with no understanding whatsoever of the technology required for developing mobile software. Management group members narrate on film how they constantly lied to potential investors and partners, and one founding member has later compared founding the firm to a bank robbery, as all of a sudden enormous amounts of money appeared on the company bank account. Such quotes are exemplified below:

*"I was lying to the left, I was lying to the right...and at the same time, I was making sandwiches. And you know what, I have come to the conclusion, that a lie is not a lie, until it is revealed to be a lie."*<sup>1</sup> A founder impersonating another founder in the documentary

*"In a way, you could say, we created this team, to commit a crime... As you rob a bank, you need, one guy, who can start the talking...third guy, who could handle, the guns, and you need a fifth guy who can do the driving away...every person in the gang, had its own role – to get the god damn fucking money"* A founder in the documentary

*"I think we should have hired bigger, better, stronger criminals and we would have made it."* A founder in the documentary, reflecting on the (accidental) hiring of a person wanted by the FBI

In fact, according to an interviewee who was present when the green light for the initial funding came, one of the founders quipped in astonishment: "I guess we really have to do

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<sup>1</sup> The language of the documentary is English, so all documentary quotes are original. The interview quotes are mostly translations.

this now.” Indeed, quickly after launch the investors urged the management group to acquire a lush headquarters and hire 100+ employees, because according to investors, the firm needed to look big in order to clinch big contracts. This resulted in a scramble for employees, which led to hiring friends and relatives (and at one point, by accident, an international criminal wanted by the FBI) - though according to firm insiders, with good intentions, and often with good results, too.

With big-name backers, a charismatic and driven team of executives, and an impressive front, Upstart successfully secured several lucrative exclusive global contracts. With the massive successes, expenses were not considered the biggest of concerns. The premises were equipped with a sauna area, a pinball machine, minibars, a pool table, video game consoles, and so on; even a terrarium with an iguana was purchased to keep the spirit soaring. Meanwhile company money was being spent for traveling and parties that the firm became (in)famous for (and according to some, prostitutes and strippers) – in one case, a company party in a high end restaurant was shut down as two employees started a wrestling match without any clothes on (they had previously been allowed to undress in return for ordering shots of liquor for the entire clientele).

Despite the difficulties in obtaining qualified workers in a short period of time, the firm had managed to attract a capable sales and marketing team as well as skilled programmers. However, as the sales people (including the management group) did not understand the technology the firm was working with, many of the projects Upstart undertook turned out to be technologically impossible to finish, which caused sizeable unnecessary costs. Combining the operational difficulties with the extravagant spending meant the firm was burning through its financial resources at an increasing pace. Even though the board of directors finally intervened after almost a year and half by replacing part of the management group, the bursting of the dotcom bubble eventually sped up the demise of Upstart, which was forced to close shop in early 2002, having burnt through over \$20 million of venture capital in exactly two years.

Spurred on by a rather scandalous documentary that some of the founding members released a few years after the bankruptcy (and thus made efforts to inscribe a version of the case into collective memory), Upstart was generally seen as a monumental failure and a case of severe corporate irresponsibility. The timing may have been unlucky with mobile technology still in infancy and with the dotcom bubble bursting, and there may have been genuine dreams and aspirations for global success, but the sheer amount of publicly perceived misconduct meant the firm was judged by it as well. And yet, despite the public

ridicule and condemnation especially at the time of the release of the documentary in 2005, many have forgotten Upstart, though it is still remembered to some extent within the industry, as evidenced in the following quotes:

*"We've seen these before. 'Oh, have I really?' Loads of them. Or have you forgotten a company called [Upstart, in IT]? They sank some tens of millions of cash in that because the idea was so great. [Large global venture capital investors] put money in their bank account in such a rate that [Upstart] was barely able to burn through it."* A blogger comparing Upstart to Zalando, which he considered a monumental failure waiting to happen, in 2013

*"Upstart created actual things after all, though its achievements became accessory compared to the splurging, partying, and megalomaniacal plans connected to it in the public."* An IT journalist in 2012, comparing Upstart to another then-imminent large-scale IT bankruptcy

Meanwhile, the ICT sector, mobile applications especially, have been running increasingly hot in recent years with no sign of lessons learned. In fact, there has since been at least one IT start-up in Upstart's home country that, only a few years after, managed to burn through even more venture capital, and following a relatively similar story of high confidence and lofty promises. It appears that even within an industry, events of irresponsibility are partly forgotten, and sometimes failure to learn lessons occurs.

The case is interesting for the problems I am investigating for several reasons. First, more than 10 years have passed since the last episode concerning Upstart (the documentary), which puts the event truly in the past. Second, as the organization eventually died, its members have moved onto different organizations and thus they hold memories of Upstart of the past rather than viewing the firm through what it is now, as would be the case with a firm that exists. This is especially important also due to the inertial tendency of organizations to forget and unlearn past events and routines (Madsen & Desai, 2010), which makes it difficult to study memory in organizations that continue existing. Third, the case of Upstart is situated in the original dot-com bubble, while at present we are arguably witnessing another ICT-(start-up-)related bubble where firms on both the investor and receiver side are exhibiting behavior comparable to the case of Upstart, which illustrates the failure to learn from past mistakes, even within industries.

# Data and method

For the **primary data**, I have conducted 17 interviews with former Upstart employees as primary data. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and in a relatively informal manner in order to give the interviewees space and enable them to relax so they would feel more comfortable sharing their stories. To get a thorough representation of the Upstart, I interviewed people from all levels of the organization, including two founders, one additional management group member, three software developers, and several individuals from marketing, sales, production, product management, and support. 17 people is a relatively thorough representation of the entire firm, seeing as Upstart had around 130 employees at best, but only a little over 40 at the time of bankruptcy. All but one interviewee were at the firm at the time it went bankrupt, and all of them were there very nearly from the start, which means the sample makes up a rather large portion of the core group of employees. Furthermore, even after considerable time having passed after the documentary, several people refused an interview, and many who agreed were at first skeptical of my identity and intentions, and expressed suspicion to a project concerning Upstart.

The duration of the interviews ranged from about 60 minutes to approximately 150 minutes. Although the interviews did have a standard structure as stated above, some deviations were made where it made more sense in terms of the flow of the conversation. The questions mostly concerned the occupational autobiographies of the interviewees, their memories of Upstart (emphasis on the atmosphere and relationships to colleagues), their perceptions of outside attention, and their reactions and relationships to the documentary. Much of the time the interviewees would go on storytelling sprees sharing small stories and anecdotes about life at Upstart and related to it. After a few interviews I started emphasizing the questions that typically generated the most fruitful discussions in order to capture a deep picture of Upstart.

**Secondary data** consists of two interviews with individuals associated with Upstart, as well as media material on the Upstart case and selected more contemporary cases that share similar properties (industry, media narratives, and so on), including a video documentary. The interviews are conducted in order to get a sense of the shared memories among former Upstart employees have of the time working there. The media data consists of more than 70 items, mostly in the form of newspaper and magazine articles, including their comment sections, but also some discussions on popular online messaging boards that were still available. This type of data is important for understanding the collective memory related to Upstart, as media is generally considered the most important mediator (and sometimes even

determinant) of collective memory (Fine, 2012; Gross, 2000), but it was also used along with the documentary initially to get a general picture of the case..

The research process consists of three phases. The first phase of the research process took place over a span of two months in late 2014. This included collection of publicly available documents from over the years concerning Upstart, as well as a video documentary about the firm, in order to get familiar with the case and get a picture of the generally accepted story of the firm. Although the initial picture was that Upstart had been a firm best characterized by spectacular recklessness and incompetence, the multitude of arguments in comment section of media articles and in particular a multi-part blog series by a former Upstarter already started to suggest a more polysemic story than what was evident in the 'official' materials. At this point I decided to reserve a greater role for the documentary in the interview structure than I had previously planned in order to gain understanding on the tensions related to how the documentary was perceived and how it impacted the former employees of Upstart.

The second phase took place in the spring of 2015, and consisted of conducting interviews with individuals who were either employed or closely involved with Upstart during its existence, collecting additional secondary data on Upstart, as well as media data on other similar cases, and finally, analysis of the data during and after collection. In terms of the employees who had worked at Upstart, I aimed to reach individuals who had worked at Upstart from the starting phases until the end. To achieve this, I first tracked down former Upstarters through the documentary credentials, and from these I crafted a shortlist of potential candidates through determining the duration of time spent at Upstart from LinkedIn profiles. This shortlist developed further from recommendations by interviewees. I simultaneously began going through the interview data, and general narratives of what kind of a firm Upstart started forming. By this time, the narrative that dominated the film and the press material had already largely formed – in other words, the dominant collective memory was largely clear at this point, while competing counter-memories started emerging.

The third and final research phase took place in spring 2015, and it involved going back and forth with the data and research writing. In this phase, the three main competing counter-memories had reached their final formation, but the iteration with the data had also brought out modes of resistance that employees took in order to cope with the dominant collective memory, which they had been unable to overturn. At this stage I also disguised the interviewees and masked the case itself in order to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

As for **the method**, stories and narrative analysis in general have well-established traditions in organization research (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2001). Many have noted the usefulness of narratives in a search for meaning (Rhodes & Brown, 2005b), while another oft-heard statement is that each event produces a plurality of stories, depending on the observer (Rhodes & Brown, 2005a). As Schwartz (1991) has noted, the difficulty in studying collective memories of past events is that it is tricky to access the memories of the consumers of propagated images (the public at large). An alternative to this is to engage with the producers of images at the time, which in the case of Upstart is the media. Thus the objects of this study include the producers of what have since become collective memories as well as members to an event that has since spawned collective memories. This allows me to access the collective memories of the mnemonic community that these members form, as well as the wider, society- and industry-level collective memory of Upstart, and engage with the discrepancies and discontinuities of these. The interplay of these levels is at the heart of this study, as some Upstart founders directly attempted to influence the industry- and society-level collective memory of the firm, and along with it to an extent, of the entire dot-com bubble.

Several commentators have noted that narrative approaches have a natural connection to temporality. Boje (2001), for example, has stressed that to understand plots, one must also understand time and temporality. Meanwhile, Czarniawska (1997) has stated that narratives locate observations in time rather than assume observations are independent of time. Narrative approaches also heavily emphasize the multiplicity of meanings in organizational action (Boje, 1995; Rhodes, 2001). What this means is that through narratives organizations can be viewed as consisting of a plurality of stories rather than as a singular reality. Thus, narratives can generate competing stories, which underlines the fact that “knowledge about organizations is actively constructed rather than a stable entity to be explicated” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005b, 178), similarly to collective memory in general, which is not surprising given the strong narrative basis of collective memory. And indeed, in the case of a dead organization the passing of time ensures that memories become contested, and as a result, the narratives diverge further.

Pearce (2004) had suggested the world of academic research consists of two parallel worlds: the world of scholarship and the world of ‘folk wisdom’, the former involving careful intellectual work and methodological application, while the latter is the product of experience and culture. For him, the latter has been underappreciated in management research, and has much to offer for the field. Rhodes & Brown (2005b) agree, and suggest that narrative

methods may offer a way of reconciling between the two worlds in a methodologically sophisticated and theoretically justified way. The authors continue: "Narrative research is, by and large, an empirical tradition that examines how experience is reflexively constructed into stories that may or may not be commensurate. It provides a methodological position through which to engage not with a presumed neutral 'real' world, but with the complex nuances of the 'lived' world." (Rhodes & Brown, 2005b, 180). Collective and autobiographical memory, in turn, can be argued to deal precisely with the local experiences of the so-called world of folk wisdom, the 'lived' world that the authors refer to. This suggests that narrative techniques can be used to gain methodological, sophisticated insights on how organizational events are remembered and forgotten, and how these processes again affect the lived world of the participants.

As is typically the generally accepted aim with narrative approaches (Rhodes & Brown, 2005b), the aim here is not to discover any general, overarching truths about Upstart and how it is remembered by its former members, but rather the different truths, the stories that people formed during their time at Upstart (and afterwards) - the lived realities of the participants in the event, or rather memories of such lived realities, which may have taken a life of their own afterwards. So perhaps it would be appropriate to say I aim to gain understanding on the afterlives of lived organizational realities.

## Contested memories

### *The manufactured memory*

*"It's an interesting thing. That when people have formed an impression based on the film and the internet discussions, without ever even visiting [Upstart's] premises, that impression is so strong that breaking that image, or even changing it, even correcting completely false information turns out to be completely impossible." U5 in an interview*

One of the facets that makes Upstart such an interesting case for study is that a relatively stable, generally agreed collective memory of it has remained within the industry, and perhaps to a lesser extent in the wider society, too. Or rather, such a collective memory has been put forth. The video documentary that was shown in cinemas and was broadcasted internationally received a fair bit of national attention when it was released a few years after Upstart went bankrupt, but especially when it was broadcasted by the national broadcasting company of its home country. The dominant collective memory has likely been preserved to



the extent that is likely due to existence of the documentary, which is essentially a material object, around which memories are typically organized (Misztal, 2003, 16). What has likely increased the credibility of the documentary is that it was directed and edited by a former Upstart employee, and the producers were both founders in the firm. Furthermore, in its existence, Upstart was rather closely followed by mainstream media outlets in its home country, and this interest was briefly rekindled around the release of the documentary; this rekindling is especially important, as images of past events may be changed if such events are subjected to retrospection (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010).

*"I said, what we need here, is Hannibal Lecter, as a 5-year old, on acid."* A founder in the documentary

The documentary put forward a very particular image of Upstart, and what went on inside the firm (something many of the interviewees confirmed without provocation). Or at least, a very particular version has been adopted - the film itself is polysemic, containing several competing narratives. There were smaller stories on Upstart as a great place to work, on long working hours and fast pace of work, of raucous company lifestyles and so, but there are two major narratives that appear to compete, and do contradict with each other. On the one hand, the film puts forward a story of a revolutionary, heroic, yet at the end flawed team of founders with unparalleled ideas, drive, and charisma. This story emphasizes how the Upstart did many things no one had done before, and almost succeeded in its aim - becoming the leading global player in mobile entertainment.

On the other hand, there is a story of callous dishonesty, irresponsibility, and incompetence - Upstart as the ultimate hustle that the founders managed to pull off, with some members in particular presented with glorifying vilification. In this story, Upstart is seen partly as a product of its time (the dotcom bubble) where big money was extracted from investors for the fun and joy of Upstarters. Here, the ideas behind Upstart and the work done there are depreciated, even ridiculed, while aspects of moral depravity and lecherous behavior are emphasized. It was all a big party with alcohol, drugs, strippers, and prostitutes, and all paid with company money. It is this latter story that was, perhaps unsurprisingly, adopted by the media and wider public.

The adopted story focuses on the flashy, party-centered company culture, the incompetence of both the management and the employees, the dishonest sales and negotiation practices of top management, and general depravities practised within company premises as well as

outside of them. These themes are illustrated in the quotes that will follow. The first quotes emphasize the party-centered lifestyle at Upstart.

*"I came to work, and I saw these coders walk around in bath robes. [shrugging nonchalantly] Drunk."* An employee in the documentary

*"Anyhow the whole city is talking about your parties. They were megalomaniac."* A talk show host on national television, talking to one of the founders in a clip presented in the documentary.

*"It was not only decadent and fucking and drug parties, there were also like children parties. [followed by lots of cuts from home-made videotapes of wild parties, presumably with Upstart]"* A founder in the documentary

The following statements were used in the film to depict the unprofessional hiring practices, the incompetence of the workforce, and lazy work routines at Upstart:

*"[because of the big investors] in a way, we should have got the best people. But for some reason we got like relatives, we got alcoholics, (couples), nymphomaniacs, (siblings), desperate self-supporting mothers, (childhood friends), I think some guys were actually taken from the bus stop...and some girls were hired just for sexual habit. So we had the number filled, quota, one hundred"* A founder in the documentary

*"In [Upstart], instead of working, most of the people in my floor, what they were doing, they were chatting in the net using IRC, playing games..."* An employee in the documentary

In the next quote, one of the founders behind the documentary is using a metaphor of crime about the firm early on in the film to instill the watcher with a sense that something out of the ordinary, perhaps even something sinister or wicked was going on with the firm - and to lace the narrative of the entire film.

*"In a way, you could say, we created this team, to commit a crime...As you rob a bank, you need, one guy, who can start the talking...third guy, who could handle, the guns, and you need a fifth guy who can do the driving away...every person in the*

*gang, had its own role – to get the goddamn fucking money”* A founder in the documentary

In line with the quotes above, the documentary has been described “flashy”, “sensational” and “entertaining” by journalists, and it was in large part the story of irresponsibility, incompetence, and recklessness that was picked up and preserved by the press. As one journalist puts it:

*“...this documentary tells a messy tale of excess. Though the company secured big money from global [investment giants], these [people] spent most of their millions developing projects that didn't work, hiring friends and family members, splashing out on parties, furnishing a ridiculously lavish office and sessions at strip clubs. In fact, some of the staff even recorded a porn movie with [Upstart] resources.”* An Australian journalist in a newspaper review of the documentary in 2005

However, some journalists also questioned the documentary's journalistic rigor, a sentiment that was shared by many former Upstarters. Indeed, several of the documentary interviewees have also expressed criticism over the journalistic practices conducted during the production of the documentary, thus contesting the narrative presented in the documentary. The interviewees for the documentary have been approached by people pretending to represent a British or Australian production company, filming a serious documentary, never revealing company insiders were behind the film. One interviewee stated that one of the producers and the former CEO of Upstart had said in public that the secrecy was necessary, for without it many of the interviewees would never had agreed to participate:

*“But maybe that's the practice of the documentarist, and [one of the founder/producers] commented when asked about my claims [over recruiting for the documentary on false pretenses], so he said that these guys could not have been gotten on board is they hadn't used these, he called them cosmetic measures, but what I call lying, but of course it wasn't so out of place for these boys to bend the truth.”* U3 in an interview

In an act to discredit the documentary, or to at least give space to alternative stories, several interviewees cast further doubt on the motivations behind and integrity of the documentary, as illustrated in the quotes below:

*“To be honest, I wasn’t so interested in the documentary, but I went and gave them an interview for the film, [and] they were trying to shove a [cannabis] bong in front of my nose - we didn’t agree to it, not one of the developers, because in the developers’ den we didn’t do drugs. That was more like management craziness; if anyone in developing did drugs, they did it at home, but in “the dev”, we coded. That’s why none of us dev’ers agreed to give them an impression that we would have been hitting on the bong or anything, because we told them that this doesn’t correspond with reality, that this is going way over the top.” U6 in an interview*

*“I had really bad [feelings about the documentary] as I had a hunch it was a sham when the first interviewer came [...and I said] I want more information on this. When the phone call came, it was so implausible, and I called a few others and they had received some vague blabbering with a slightly different spin so I thought there was something wrong[...].they were saying something about an economics documentary for British use.” U11 in an interview*

Considering the allegations surrounding the documentary and the narrative style, we may call the version imprinted by the documentary a *manufactured memory*. It is a manufactured memory in the literal sense. The mnemonic trace, the object that carries this memory, is the result of a professional production process. However, more importantly, it is a commemoration of Upstart. As already Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) pointed out, commemorations are often invented, and always serve a specific purpose or cast an event or issue in a particular light (Zerubavel, 1996). Commemorations can also be seen as struggles or negotiations between competing narratives - indeed, commemorations may entail “creating, preserving, or destroying memories” (Misztal, 2003, 127). Through pushing a video documentary for both box office and television showing, the authors of the documentary are attempting to preserve a memory of Upstart, while creating a very specific version of it, and at the same time suppressing any competing narratives through the sheer force and reach of their own narrative. At the same time, the documentary is a form of facilitating forgetting: while it serves as a reminder, or a projector, of certain facets of Upstart, it in turn pushes other facets under the carpet, facilitating their forgetting. As Schudson (1995, p) has noted: “A form of remembering is a form of forgetting.” Here, what is being promoted is the remembering of scandalous activity, irresponsibility, and incompetence, while the forgetting of hard work and expertise is facilitated.

### **Competing narratives**

*“[The film] of course shapes the image that outsiders have of Upstarters, but I do remember that it also heavily shaped the image Upstart employees had about the issue.”* U5 in an interview

While mnemonic communities are typically characterized by shared visions of the past and the future (Misztal, 2003, 15), they also tend to change over time due to changing frames of meaning, both in terms of the memory that is shared and the consistency of their memberships. Such changes generally follow major social shifts that affect entire mnemonic communities (Misztal, 2003, 82). In the case of Upstart, a major social shift can be seen in the making and releasing of the documentary, which conveyed a very particular story of the firm. This shift likely contributed to the currently observable fragmentation of the mnemonic community that consisted of the former organization. The mnemonic community has not since been able to arrive at a mutually shared version of Upstart.

Although Upstart may have to a considerable extent eroded from collective memory on the level of the general public, there are still mnemonic communities that have retained memories of the case. One such group consists of industry insiders, and includes people who used to work in other firms in the same market as Upstart, as well as reporters that took an interest in the firm. Another group is obviously firm insiders. While collective memories within smaller groups such as communities change over time (Olick & Robbins, 1998), it should also be noted that individuals sharing a collective memory will likely each have at least slightly different versions (Rhodes & Brown, 2005a; Schudson, 1992, pp), which also may differ each time they are narrated (Rubin, 1996, 4).

As has been discussed by others (Mena et al., 2015; Misztal, 2003; Zerubavel, 1996), events generally generate different memories, around which different mnemonic communities are formed. This is typically followed by a memory struggle: the different mnemonic communities, or certain members of sub-groups within mnemonic communities, each attempt to push their version to become the generally accepted (collective) memory. Misztal (2003, 12), citing Zerubavel (1997), has noted that cognitive battles over memory, or struggle over which version of an event will prevail, take place between such mnemonic communities rather than individuals. At the end, one of the mnemonic communities typically prevails and its memory version becomes the generally accepted one, while some of the other memories may be preserved in smaller communities, usually (at least partly) the original mnemonic communities, but they will have relatively little significance outside of these communities (Schudson, 1992). In a sense, these memories, these alternate (re)configurations of past events, become forgotten in the larger scheme of things, while the generally accepted one

may prevail in some shape or form at least for some time. Such has been the story in the case of Upstart as well.

<p><b>Irresponsibility and incompetence</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"Nobody could ever answer any of the questions, even simple questions like what is the character set used in SMS messages, nobody knows...how can it be that [an organization in this business and these resources] nobody knows about the technology? I don't know what they were smoking most of the time [chuckling]"</i></li> <li>• <i>"[impersonating the CEO] I was lying to the left, I was lying to the right...and at the same time, I was making sandwiches. And you know what [addressing another founder], I have come to the conclusion, that a lie is not a lie, until it is revealed to be a lie."</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Recklessness and innovation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"So I thought there was great potential here, the only thing that that messed it up was that the financiers didn't want to put more money into the burn rate, because [the top management] couldn't convince the financiers that this is what will happen. Nobody saw the future."</i></li> <li>• <i>"So the way Upstart was built, at least that's the impression I got, was that the only options were to either crash into a wall at full speed or become a global success, that there was no chance that it would be cut down in size and be made into a small business and see what comes of that, but that with the money that we have, we go and either sell it for a billion or bury it."</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>A normal workplace</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"All the elements were there, yeah. Lots of money, and then booze and women and everything. And if as a workplace you think what kinds of things were organized by the company, then I don't think it really deviated from a normal, or any workplace, like we had Christmas parties and summer parties and so on. And then there were similar types of people around town, there were other IT firms who had received a lot of money, so the whole atmosphere in town was a bit different."</i></li> <li>• <i>"So yeah, pretty often we used to go for a beer after work and then some of the people got back to work and, well, maybe it was my life situation [he had a young child] and that I wasn't new to these things. You know, having played in a rock band and been on the road, made movies, I've sometimes chuckled at the talks of how wild things were supposed to have been [at Upstart]."</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Hard work and professionalism</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>"Well of course I can speak for myself that at times [working hours] were around the clock, but then at other times it was a bit more relaxed, but we worked quite a lot."</i></li> <li>• <i>"I worked pretty much around the clock. Afterwards I've been wondering why I ever worked so much, I could have worked much less and done a lot less work [the interviewee later burned out while at Upstart]."</i></li> </ul>

Table 2. The memory (in bold) and counter-memories

Rather than witnessing a cognitive struggle between individuals over which memory prevails, we observe different small groups attempting to push their versions of a story to forefront, taken forward by reputational entrepreneurs (Fine, 2012), such as the producers of the documentary, or the members of Upstart who threatened the documentary makers with legal measures. Roughly, one version of the story depicts the firm as a reckless yet innovative project, much like how most interpreted from the film, while another one emphasizes the hard work and high level of drive in the firm while considering the story in by the documentary an outright lie, or at the very least a narrow and purposeful account of life at Upstart. The third account sees Upstart as any other firm, especially at the time of the dotcom bubble. These accounts are briefly exemplified in Table 1. The latter two accounts share the disavowal of the manufactured, reigning collective memory put forth by the documentary, and so the majority of the people I interviewed had negative feelings about the documentary; the memory that has been left behind through the documentary is still generally met with confusion, anger, bitterness, and resentment. One former Upstarter shared with me his disappointment at the stories told in the documentary, stressing the unjustness of it as well as the negative feelings it caused in the 'victims' of such a tale:

*“But if people were made to believe we nepotistically hired all sorts of fools to drink and fuck each other, then that doesn’t correspond to the truth at all in my opinion, I think that smearing, I didn’t like it at all. Not so much for my own sake, or partially for my own sake as well, but for the sake of others especially. Because the talent there was so palpable, and most people really didn’t, I mean most people worked very hard, sometimes with high competence too, but especially very hard.”* U3 in an interview

The quote above also reveals the interpretations some of the viewers representing opposing mnemonic communities made of the film. Even with its polysemy, the narratives that stuck were those depicting incompetence, scandal, and depravity.

Many former employees generally stressed the amount of work and quality of the workforce at Upstart, as opposed to what was put forward in the film. The stories of hard work came through in both personal accounts as well as in more general assessments of the atmosphere at Upstart. As one former Upstarter put it:

*“The only thing I thought was bad was that I couldn’t manage the working hours, and of course they threw at me whatever work needed to be done, and in the end I had 700 hours of overtime in a half year, so I had been living at the office, and had been doing something all the time.”* U6 in an interview

*“Let’s put it like this, at [Upstart], things were done. There really was a bunch of super professionals, like none of them was incompetent, that I can tell you. Everyone was...very competent, each and every one, and all of that was kind of new but still everybody worked for the thing to move forward, so not one person was slacking, so that was nice, that the atmosphere was efficient.”* U6 in an interview

Most also downplayed the party culture at the firm, emphasizing that many other companies then and since have had just as many parties and more, and with similar intensity. Some other former Upstarters also pointed out that the average age at the firm was very low, so even if there was partying, there was not any more of that than in any other community of 20-somethings. Most of the former Upstarters considered at least part of the film untrue, but in particular, many also stressed the consequences they feared such a story would have on both their personal and professional lives - they feared the potential stigmatizing effects of the film. One interviewee told how his life partner walked out of the apartment, dazed, after seeing the documentary, saying the future father of her children could not be that person.

Others told stories about awkwardness of explaining the video to family and relatives, as exemplified by the following quote:

*“So I had to answer some awkward questions too, specifically like, you were just boozing and doing drugs, so that’s really a bit annoying. So in the aftermath of that documentary these questions were posed by my parents and relatives and so on, but I guess that’s part of a story like that.”* U3 in an interview

And while many thought the documentary caused negative consequences in terms of their private lives, some were very concerned about the impact the film’s story might have on them professionally, as the film came out only a few years after the bankruptcy, and many former Upstarters were still near the beginning of their careers. Examples of such concerns and experiences are expressed in the following quotes:

*“So I had this feeling that I’ll just stop this personal getting hurt now, but then there was this other level that since we had founded [our own] firm on the claim that our expertise is based on [Upstart], then we couldn’t use it as a reference when everybody was laughing at the movie, so that was like a really big bomb, and there we have lost a lot of credibility, that we are kind of the natural continuum for this messing about and so on, so that irritated me a lot.”* U11 in an interview

*“And then there was that phase of the film when they started airing it on TV. Of that time I have a memory that in business circles some people senior to me have referred to [Upstart] and my role there, and that there’s been this derisory tone in that talk. I’m pretty certain about these memories, that this did happen.”* U5 in an interview

### ***Resisting the manufactured memory***

With the concerns about stigmatization, professional or otherwise, in order to resist the memory-manufacturing efforts of the filmmakers, members of the mnemonic community that were hostile towards the story propagated by the film, engaged in a mnemonic struggle in the public sphere. This was done by attempting to thwart the publication of the film through threats of **legal measures**, advancing counter-narratives through internet discussions and, participating in talk shows in national television, and eventually remaining silent. Legal measures were considered in order to right perceived wrongs and likely to bring justice to



perceived injustice. In the following statement, a former Upstarter talks about legal measures as forms of resistance:

*“And I was really close to taking that thing to the court just for the audacity, that they stole some of our [private] materials[...]. So you’re around 30 years of age, and you have to go to the cinema [premiere] with lawyers, well that was a kind of a weird feeling.”* U11 in an interview

While attempting legal measures is a very concrete way of resisting, other measures were also taken up. In particular, launching and propagating **narratives of counter-memories** was taken up by several former Upstarters. Much of this was conducted online in connection to the most publicized magazine articles that were published near the release of the documentary, but one former Upstarter also went as far as to go on live television, on a national talk show, to offer a different version of the story. One former Upstarter also allegedly wrote a complaint to the National Film Foundation about the production methods of the documentary, providing an example of another route for propagating counter-memories. Such online commentaries are demonstrated below:

*“But it’s not all that noteworthy. For example, having been there, [a party specifically referred to in the documentary] paled in its ‘craziness’ by some distance when compared to e.g. some of the Christmas parties of publicly listed firms that I’ve heard of. At the end there wasn’t anything strange, perverse, or even interesting going on there[...]. What I’m most afraid of is that successful and harmless parties like [the one in question] will inflate into ‘group sex orgies’ now that the story of the firm is being worked into a sensation story with this much enthusiasm.”* A commenter on a media story that received close to 60 comments, in 2004

*“[A documentary interviewee, former Upstarter] has personally sent a written complaint where he presented accusations concerning the methods of production, which he later repeated in an interview program by the National Broadcasting Company, even though these claims had already once been ascertained to have been baseless and untrue, and the letter did not lead to any sort of actions.”* A founder and lead producer of the documentary in an open letter published online

Here, forms of remembering work were attempted in order to interrogate the past, questioning the story told in the documentary while illuminating inconsistencies, potential motivations of the film producers, and alternative versions of events (Kuhn, 2010). At the

same time, the quotes illustrate the memory struggle that was taking place: opposing claims and narratives were pushed by different actors. However, despite these attempts at remembering work, ultimately many felt rather powerless in front of the story put forward in the documentary, especially when it came to the wider public. While offering counter-memories may have been an effective tactic in the private sphere – many noted that they managed to get their story through in private dealings, whether with family or business associates – influencing the public sphere was a different matter. Many felt going up against a widely publicized story felt an insurmountable challenge, as many journalists picked up the story that was told in the documentary, and many were keen to believe the story in the aftermath of all the lost capital due to the dot-com meltdown. On the other hand, taking legislative action against a business firm appeared a daunting prospect as well. As an example, one interviewee recounts the following:

*“They claim in the [film] dvd extras that I’ve abused [...] my position as a television journalist, and could be incriminated for corruption. Now that kind of claim is [...] completely false. I went and asked the distributor that are you guys going to keep this; you know this is not true, so you can be taken to court for this. Well that didn’t, as an individual person I couldn’t have prevented it anyway, going against a film distributor.”* U7 in an interview

As the more active forms of resistance proved unfruitful, other forms of resistance were taken up as well. Perhaps some former Upstarters felt there was, at the end, little they could do in order to prevent the story in the documentary from being told, or retell the story in a format that would have cast them in a more favorable light. Thus many resorted to **silence** as a form of resistance: to remain silent of a past event or issue may hasten its fading from collective memory, and as studies suggest, silence is a frequent way organizing forgetting in order to defend group values or image (Misztal, 2003, 141). Many former Upstarters brought up forms of silence as resistance to the manufactured collective memory of Upstart, also in terms of public resistance efforts, as evidenced in the following quotes:

*“Yeah I can totally see how people feel about that. The more noise you make about it the more adverse the effect, I think the smart thing to do is to be quiet about it and let the whole thing blow over.”* U4 in an interview

*“Then I got a feeling that nah, this won’t attract that much attention, and this whole flick is so confused anyway, that I won’t bother [with litigation].”* U11 in an interview

While many resorted to silence to deal with the public reception of the documentary and the collective memory that was formed, several former Upstarters took up silence in their more private dealings as well; particularly in business dealings, such as job interviews or when attempting to secure funding for a start-up, as some explicitly noted:

*"Have to say that I still tread with care with [post-documentary Upstart], or like it's not the first thing you bring up from your CV[...]In terms of your professional expertise, it's the reputation that counts, so [Upstart] is not the first thing you mention [now that people have seen the film]." U13 in an interview*

*"And that was one thing that, right now we won't put [Upstart] as one of the firms in our investor papers because it has such a stigmatic stamp on it; you just can't put it there because they'll think we'll just splurge the money, somehow that stigma always comes along. That's why I have [names of other former employees] in there." U6 in an interview*

A few decided to wear their badges with whatever honor they had, and remained decidedly **indifferent** to the potentially stigmatic consequences of the documentary. One former Upstarter in particular stated how he has continued to give presentations concerning Upstart, and many have kept the mention in their CVs and LinkedIn profiles (although, as noted above, many did this reluctantly). A former member emphasized his indifference to the collective memory created with the documentary:

*"I've lectured a lot throughout my life, and I've never tried to hide my background at [Upstart], though haven't really flaunted it either. But you can find it in my LinkedIn and Facebook profiles, and last year I [gave a presentation on Upstart in a large IT-event]." U5 in an interview*

Such indifference can be seen as resisting the documentary by making a point about not budging under the weight of the collective memory, but rather expressly holding on to one's identity. Similarly to silence, one who resorts to indifference can expect to be vindicated by the passage of time: memories tend to fade as time passes, as forgetting is the default function of memory (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006). Thus, such tactics, and silence in particular, can be expected to be reasonable tactics for mnemonic struggles where the opposing side(s) hold considerably more power.

At the end, the professional consequences of the film and the memory left behind by it have likely not been terribly severe in the case of Upstart, as attested by the successful careers many of the former members of the organization have continued to have, and this corresponds with the personal statements many made about the issue in retrospect, even if it may have frightened them at first. As one of the former Upstarters with a negative outlook on the story endorsed by the film concluded:

*“But no real harm [in the long run], so probably on the positive side all things considered, as after all within the industry people understood what [the film] was about, and probably after all admired the spirit [of Upstart] a little bit, like it was a pretty cool thing in a way.”* U3 in an interview

This quote also echoes the sentiments of several former Upstarters of how, with passing of time, they have perceived a change in the way outsiders regard the case of Upstart, that instead of suspicion, it has become a “cool” thing to have worked there. This change has occurred without any notable efforts from interested parties, and is likely a reflection of the times; with the success of Rovio and Supercell among others, bold IT start-ups have come to be seen in a positive light again. This is in fact explicitly pointed out by one former Upstarter:

*“But now we’re in the post-documentary era, now that this much time has passed, and that has changed, the flick is remembered differently. Now there’s this weird, undefinable sense of admiration [for it].”* U5 in an interview

Even if at least most former members of Upstart seem to have survived unscathed professionally, the emotional scars are still there for those who felt insulted or wronged. A few interviewees confessed they had suffered from depression in the aftermath of Upstart due to the high workload, and thought the depiction of Upstart employees as lazy felt particularly unfair. Several others were still visibly irritated from discussing the film and continue carrying grudges over it towards the producer; one interviewee even burst into tears when discussing the documentary. So even though in this particular instance for most people the manufactured memory of the downfall of a firm did not lead to professional consequences (of course, that is difficult to verify one way or the other), many recalled it having the potential for it. Furthermore, the psychological consequences still feel very real for those who do not agree with the story in that memory; there is still resentment and irritation, and some relationships remain broken.

*“If the producers felt good about venting their feelings of misery, then that’s positive. [A moment’s silence]. I don’t think there’s anything positive about [the film].”* U7 in an interview

## Discussion and conclusion

In this article I have presented the case of Upstart as an extreme case of memory work both in terms of forgetting and remembering. After the bankruptcy, a few founders of the dead firm sought to paint a highly scandalous picture of the firm while burying several other aspects of what Upstart was and meant to many of its former employees. Furthermore, many former Upstarters felt the danger of becoming stigmatized by the manufactured memory, and attempted to resist the memory through institutional (legal) measures, counter-memories, silence, and indifference. However, lacking sufficient power to challenge the film distributors or re-narrate the memory, former Upstarters were left with the options of silence and indifference, which became their primary means of resistance in a wait for the publicity to blow over. And eventually it did, leaving the survivors of the storm to carry on with their pursuits more or less unmolested.

There are a few issues that are particularly worthy of paying attention to. First, the potential of influencing, and even manufacturing organizational pasts, whether living or dead, is clearly significant. In this case, a firm of relatively moderate fame became a national celebrity after its death due to the work of a few individuals with power in the right areas. With the documentary, a few choice individuals managed to paint a picture of past events, indeed create a collective memory in the minds of people who had never been in touch with Upstart. This was done through skillful storytelling and resourceful realization of an entertaining documentary film. There is nothing that would prevent similar attempts on firms that exist, and indeed, revelatory narratives are now and again published concerning firms that are still alive and kicking – recent accounts on the work atmosphere at Amazon serve as a case in point (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). The lesson here is that corporate pasts are typically dictated by those with the most power in terms of networks, financial resources, and institutional knowhow; in other words, the organization or its top management will typically dictate this.

Second, as a continuation of the first point, this study highlights the inherently subjective nature of narrated corporate pasts. In this case, the film should not be interpreted as a description of past events a historian would aim for, but rather as an attempt to tell stories with specific ends in mind (likely related to the selling of a commercial product, the film itself), and as such it becomes a powerful vehicle for memory work. The film is then successfully

picked up by other stakeholders, the media in particular, which again mediates the story to the public, creating a collective memory of Upstart. The problem here is that in the process, this narrative piece is interpreted as a 'true' history of Upstart rather than a story told from a particular angle and with particular ends. In such a way, with the lack of pluralistic interpretations, a story becomes a history, and will paint the participants in the story according to its narrative rather than those of their own. Thus, what ends up remembered are the things the powerful storytellers want – in this case, the film producers/founders – while other aspects become forgotten, such as the hard and skillful work done at Upstart as insisted by many former employees. What is worthwhile is that as these stories are propagated partly due to their entertainment value and that they have no requirement for any notion of truthfulness as such, not only do they possess a threat to firm reputation, but also to that of the individuals who are involved with such firms.

As a third point, it is important to draw attention to the opportunities of those whom the story concerns to resist it, if they want to contest it. In this case, the former employees attempted several forms of resistance towards the memory work conducted through the documentary. However, they lacked the resources and zeal to silence the documentary through legal measures, or to produce strong enough counter-memories on their own. However, as the past has a tendency of ending up forgotten (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006), the measures of remaining silent and taking an indifferent distance to past events worked well enough in the long run. This may serve as a lesson to individuals who end up drawn into stigmatizing accounts of their employers that remaining silent over it, and perhaps taking a step back and retaining a cool distance to the firm and events may be an effective tactic of coping with a publicized past. In a nutshell, it would appear that the power relationships between different groups at collective memory configuration process dictate what sort of tactics different groups should take up.

Finally, this study also highlights the power of narrative efforts in formulating organizational pasts. While there is some understanding on the roles and effects of material things on the formation of collective memory of organizational pasts, there is much less understanding on symbolic efforts such as narratives. This study of Upstart effectively demonstrates that mainly narrative efforts can have a highly significant effect on how organizations come to be seen in the present and the future; in fact, collective memories can be manufactured solely based on narrative efforts.

### **Implications for research**

The impact of emotions such as guilt (Spicer, 2011) and shame (Creed et al., 2014) in organizations have received some attention, and there is an entire emerging literature on stigma in organizations (Devers et al., 2009; Kulik et al., 2008). The notion of stigma has been investigated in connection to organizational failure; for instance, Semadeni and colleagues (2008) have found that executives who leave the organization prior to firm failure suffer fewer labor market consequences than their colleagues who remain in such an organization - in other words, organizational failures tend to have negative consequences at least for the executives who are involved with them. But what if we cannot trust these perceptions of failure or wrongdoing? Through collective memory it is possible to view different mnemonic configurations of past events as competing narratives that may or may not accurately depict what happened before. At the same time, through memory it is possible to tap into the long-term influences of such events, and gain better understanding of the long-term processes and consequences of forgetting-as-reconfiguration. In this study, we see a film declaring irresponsibility and generally unethical behavior propelling Upstart into the national forefront after years of quiet non-existence, causing much distress in many former members, and then see how the memory eventually turns almost into a positive one with more favorable cultural conditions, which illustrates how working on memory or forgetting may have both expected and unexpected outcomes. An investigation into the complex relationship between organizational or individual stigma and collective memories surrounding organizations would seem to be timely.

And what about the long-term consequences of such (potentially falsely attributed) individual stigmatizations? The memories of the film still elicit pain, confusion, outrage, and sadness - and memories of guilt and shame - in many of the former members of Upstart. As life at the organization itself caused burnouts and depression in the employees, re-enacting the events in an even more scandalous light seems unnecessary. And seeing how this re-enactment still has psychological effects on the former employees in a case that is ultimately quite mild as there was no death involved, for example, one can only wonder how a more severe case, or more severe storying, might affect participants. Again, future investigations would seem worthwhile.

While this essay has mostly focused on the actor-driven aspects of collective memories of an organization, studies focusing on the cultural constraints to processes of collective memories would be of use in order to better understand possibilities to influence such memories in the wider context. One way of gaining insight of such processes could be to conduct a detailed post-hoc media analysis of a significant corporate event from the perspective of collective memory - perhaps an event of corporate irresponsibility. If such analysis could be combined

with a detailed narrative-based case study, it could also yield interesting insights of the interplay of cultural and interest-driven processes of collective memory and organizations.

### **Implications for practitioners**

The findings of this study have certain implications for employees (or former employees) of organizations who are forced to cope with potentially stigmatizing accounts concerning their organizations, which in turn implicate and affect the members as well. If the power of the actor pushing a certain story is significantly high, it may be best to simply remain silent and wait for the storm to blow over. Another, perhaps complementary tactic, is to take an indifferent distance to the claims and act as if nothing out of the ordinary has occurred. That may help an individual convince outsiders that at least he or she had nothing to do with whatever is being alleged. Though in many cases stories that involve corporate wrongdoing are often connected to contemporary events, the case of Upstart demonstrates that the past can also be made a public affair that has consequences for the present and the future.

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## Publication 4

**Rintamäki, Jukka. Unpublished essay.**

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# Contesting the legacy of a dead organization: Collective memory, legacy organizational identity, and occupational identity

## ABSTRACT

When organizations die, they leave behind a legacy, sometimes a lasting one. Indeed, they leave behind a legacy identity – an idea of what was central to the organization that existed. In this paper, drawing on literatures on organizations and identity, and collective memory, I show that such legacy identities can be invented and made public through memory work, i.e. activities for influencing collective memory. Through a case study of the institutionalization a legacy of irresponsibility on a bankrupt firm, I demonstrate that such memory work may also have serious consequences for the occupational identities of the employees of the focal firm. This, I argue, has potential consequences for their future careers and organizations.

## INTRODUCTION

A curious thing about organizations is that when they die, their members (typically) survive and carry on their professional activities elsewhere. But what happens to the identity of the organization at this point? Recent research on legacy identity of the organization – the remnants of organizational identities that survive (Gerstroem, 2015; Walsh & Glynn, 2008) – suggests it lives on in the former members of the organization, in one form or another. However, what happens in the longer term is another question, as collective memories of organizations fragment and fluctuate over time (Misztal, 2003; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Rowlinson et al, 2010; Zerubavel, 1996), and with them, so does presumably the identity of the organization (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Foster, Suddaby, Minkus & Wiebe, 2011). Particularly, if the end of the firm comes in a distinctly memorable, even scandalous manner, what kind of an effect will this have on the legacy identity of a firm in the long term? And most importantly, will this have an effect on the occupational identities of the former employees?

An extreme case of the fragmentation of collective memories of an organization and its legacy

identity, combined with scandalous behavior, can be found in Upstart, a former multinational Northern Europe-based tech firm that lived fast around the time of the dot-com bubble, and went out with a bang. Upstart's lifespan lasted from the year 2000 to 2002, but even in that short period of time the firm managed to grow extremely quickly and attract a substantial amount of domestic and international attention. During its two-year existence it garnered international fame by way of its lucrative global licensing deals with top-tier entertainment franchises. Fame soon turned to infamy. After tumultuous times and a few controversial rumors, the company filed for bankruptcy in 2002 after burning through more than \$20 million of venture capital and an undisclosed amount of debt.

One of the most interesting aspects of the case of Upstart is that the founders of the firm filmed a documentary of Upstart that received a considerable amount of national attention, and was even granted a primetime airing on BBC alongside cinema showings and several airings by the national broadcasting company. The documentary has a very specific take on what Upstart was and what happened there during its rise, heyday, and fall: the major narrative in the film is unethical behavior, irresponsibility, and incompetence at all levels of the firm. The documentary shaped the accepted collective memory of the firm, and thus its legacy identity as well. Meanwhile, some groups of former members of Upstart share differing (collective) memories, and originally sought to bring them to the national forefront as well. Seeing as interpretations of exogenous (and endogenous) events have an impact on the construction of organizational identities (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen & Thomas, 2010; Creed, DeJordy & Lok., 2010; Gerstroom, 2015; Gioia, Price, Hamilton & Thomas, 2010), we may assume this has consequences on the legacy identity that are worth investigating as well.

Identity has been a subject of interest in organization studies for a long time, both in terms of (occupational) identities of employees and identities of organizations themselves (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008). One strand of research in studies on organizational identities has focused on how identities of organizations change in various circumstances (Clark et al., 2010; Creed et al., 2010), while some have looked at the role of organizational identity in inter-organizational knowledge transfer (Kane, Argote & Levine, 2005). Although most work on organizational identity focuses on organizations that continue to exist (at least at the time of the respective studies) in one shape or the other, some recent literature has also examined what happens to organizational identities after they die, and cease to exist – the legacy identity of organizations (Gerstroom, 2008; Walsh & Glynn, 2008). Similarly, the identity consequences of traumatic events such as those of incompetence, irresponsibility, or unethical actions, are little understood, though some noteworthy investigations into work identities in toxic industries have been made (Frandsen, 2012).

Studying legacy organizational identities offers a unique lens for examining the enduring or changing of identities without many of the factors that are present in functioning organizations, such as organizational form (Hsu & Hannan, 2005). Thus, legacy organizational identity permits the investigation of the individual elements of organizational identity as well as the changing or enduring aspects of organizational identity over time. The importance of heritage for construction of new identities has been noted in organizational research (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), but also in other types of circumstances too, such as with host cities for Olympic games (Glynn, 2008). In such cases, legacy is even consciously desired, and such legacies often hybridize common identity attributes such as utilitarianism (the economic gains brought by the event) or ideology (human achievement, aspiration). Glynn (2008) further points out that legacy identities in fact reside in collective memory: in connection the Olympics, the Olympic legacy is memorialized in materially in the new and renovated urban architecture as well as symbolically in the identity of an 'Olympic City'.

This type of legacy identity is considered useful and attractive for the cities, and similarly one might venture that business organizations may find some attributes of legacy identities of deceased firms useful as brought with them by new employees. And while Gestroem (2015) provides interesting insights to the formation of a legacy organizational identity through company death, what kinds of influence this will have on the work identities of the members of the dying organization is poorly understood. Such understanding is important because it essentially determines what former employees will take with them from such legacy organizational identities.

Walsh & Glynn (2008) also point to the role of leadership in legacy organizational identity formation; leadership plays an important role in catalyzing and perpetuating legacy identities, much like in functioning organizations (Hogg & Terry, 2000). But with the organizational hierarchy gone, who become such leaders, what other actors participate in legacy organizational identity formation, how are legacy organizational identities enacted, and what kinds of struggles are involved?

Although the connection between memory and identity has been recognized by many scholars of social sciences and philosophy (Derek Parfit even argues they come from the same place; Parfit, 1984), this connection has not been studied much in organization studies (Anteby & Molnar, 2012, offer a notable exception). Halbwachs (1992) thought that it is collective memory that enables both individual and collective identities, while the upholders of



collective memories, mnemonic communities (Misztal, 2003; Zerubavel, 1996), often also hold share collective identities; particularly when the mnemonic community is an organization.

The aforementioned issues become particularly interesting in cases where the death of the organization has involved perceptions of irresponsibility or unethical behavior. Such events are more likely to be remembered due to their negative aura as well as being pronouncedly non-routine events (Mena, Rintamäki, Spicer & Fleming, 2015). Publicized organizational crises, on the other hand, typically pose a threat to organizational identities and have consequences for members' individual identities (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Warren, 2007). Events or perceptions of irresponsibility thus provide an appropriate context for studying struggles in legacy organizational identity.

In the case of Upstart, even if there was a collectively shared understanding of the firm during its existence, the memories have become fragmented, and I would argue, so thus has also the legacy identity of the organization. Hence, in this paper, the question(s) I seek to address is, *what is the relationship between collective memory and organizational legacy identity, how is the fragmentation of the memory of organizational identity manifested in retrospect, and what kinds of consequences does this have for member work identities?*

Seeing as both organizational identities (Alvesson et al., 2008) and collective memory (Olick & Robbins, 1998) are often manifested in stories and narratives, and stories also often yield insights on organizations that are otherwise difficult to obtain (Gabriel, 2001), it seems appropriate I approach the puzzle through analyzing stories and narratives provided by former members of Upstart (Boje, 2002; Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

My narrative analysis reveals that in the case of Upstart, the legacy organizational identity has in fact fluctuated with time, and to a particularly great extent due to active forgetting work – a widely distributed documentary film – by some members of former top management.

Essentially a collective memory of the firm was manufactured. This work manifested in the form of a powerful identity claim, which many of the former members disidentified with and offered counter memories containing competing identity claims. The result was a fragmented legacy organizational identity, where documentary-generated identity claim served as an anchor for the other identity claims. Moreover, several former members of Upstart have formed parts of their professional identities on the basis of this struggle for a legacy organizational identity. Many recite their competing legacy identity claims as the basis, but are at the same time forced to explain it through the narrative offered in the documentary. In

this paper, I will first provide an overview of relevant streams of literature on organizational identity and collective memory. Next, I will present the case of Upstart in terms of the research theme, after which I will explain the narrative methodology and data. I will then provide an analysis of the data, and finally I will discuss the analysis and conclude the paper with suggestions for future research.

## **IDENTITY AND MEMORY**

Anteby & Molnar (2012) note that much of the research on organizational identities has focused on identity emergence and change, both of which are typically prompted by singular events. Some of the well-trod areas include the formation stages of an organization (Corley & Gioia, 2004), sudden changes in regulations (e.g. Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal & James, 1988), mergers and acquisitions (e.g. Clark et al., 2010), and other key disruptive events (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). However, as pointed out by others (Gerstroom, 2015; Walsh & Glynn, 2008), the death of an organization – in this case, going bankrupt – has received very little attention in the identity literature. One might assume that organizational identity will cease to exist with the end of the formal organization, even though research has shown that former members of organization often continue to identify with their former organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bardon et al., 2014). But much of the research on individuals identifying with their former organizations have focused on the types of benefits the former organizations may accrue e.g. through alumni networks (Iyer, 1998), which is of course interesting only if the former organizations still exist. A better understanding of organizational identity processes after death is potentially interesting, especially as the connection between identity and knowledge transfer (Kane, 2010; Kane, Argote & Levine, 2005; Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007) would suggest such processes would exist after organizations die. And since organizational death is quite a common phenomenon, investigating the active processes of legacy organizational identity formation and whether they have any bearing (and if so, what kind) on the professional identities of the former members who have moved on.

There are some arguments to be made for the endurance and evolution of identities even after organizational death. Indeed, the distinction between the informal and formal organization (e.g. Gulati & Puranam, 2009) is an acknowledged phenomenon, and bearing that in mind, the end of the formal organization consequently does not mean the dissolution of organizational identity. Meanwhile, Anteby & Molnar (2012) show how an aeronautics firm's identity can endure through decades of changing institutional environments through maintaining a steady narrative by omitting certain disruptive elements. On the other hand Howard-Grenville, Metzger & Meyer (2013) have shown how organizational identities can be resurrected even after years of identity decline. These studies point at the considerable resilience of

organizational identities, and the notion of organizational identities survive the death of an organization in one form or another (Gerstroem, 2015; Walsh & Glynn, 2008). But although the change (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) or endurance (Anteby & Molnar, 2012) of organizational identities have been subject to scholarly attention, how or whether these processes occur after the death of an organizations have not been explored almost at all.

According to Walsh & Glynn (2008, legacy organizational identity expresses the central characteristics of the firm that used to be, a certain distinctiveness, and is presumably something the former members identify with, much like the identity of a functioning organization. It also influences the actions of its former members (albeit to a lesser extent than the identity of one's current organization would), informs their decision making, and guides their performance. However, the authors suggest it is more temporally fixed, preserving a valued past and bringing it to the present. Another difference is change initiation; whereas an organizational identity is influenced by internal and external actors, Walsh & Glynn (2008) suggest legacy identities are primarily affected by internal actors who re-interpret or reconstruct the identity. And finally, while organizations typically claim their own identities, legacy identities are characterized and asserted by the members of the organization, as the organization itself is not there anymore. Furthermore, while expeditions into legacy organizational identities have yielded interesting and useful insights, Gerstroem's (2015) empirical investigation and its discoveries that contradict some of the theorizations of Walsh & Glynn (2008) – namely, that some identity claims persist, while others end after or at the death of an organization – already reveals that empirical work on the phenomenon has only begun.

Seeing as it has been suggested that there is an interdependent relationship between organizational identity and organizational death where identity and death "form and are formed by each other" (Gerstroem, 2015, 92), one might venture that organizational identities are subject to change after organizational death – perhaps even likely to take a life of their own, ironically enough. If such is the case, one has to ask, what will be the anchor to hold a legacy identity together in a continuous process of evolution? Some literature (Anteby & Molnar, 2012), consistent with Walsh & Glynn (2008), would suggest that memory, and in the case of a collective identity, collective memory, is where identity is anchored, if not located. And as collective memory is a constantly evolving, highly selective process (Olick & Robbins, 1998) that involves fragmented and contested memories held and promoted by various mnemonic communities (Zerubavel, 1996), can we not expect legacy identity to be similarly fragmented, even contested? And what does this mean for occupational identities of former members? Given the role of identification and identity preservation in knowledge

transfer, their roles in the struggle for the legacy of an organization is particularly interesting in the case of a failed organization: what sorts of professional identities emerge from the ruins of a shamed organization?

Collective memory can be defined as "the representation of the past, both that shared by a group and that which is collectively commemorated, that enacts and gives substance to the group's identity, its present conditions and its vision of the future" (Misztal, 2003, 7), and it is considered a selective, political process that unfolds over time (Olick & Robbins, 1998). Collective memories are upheld and commemorated by mnemonic communities, which may consist of a family, an ethnic group, a nation, or an organization, for example (Zerubavel, 1996). Events and mnemonic communities generate mnemonic traces such as narratives, documents, and buildings, and over time draw on them to uphold their meanings or produce new ones. Typically, several memories emerge from junctures, events, or series of events, and there is a variety of mnemonic communities that engage in a mnemonic struggle over which version will prevail as the generally shared memory.

Sometimes (versions of) memories that have lost the mnemonic struggle and have not become part of collective memory, remain in small pockets, while tensions may remain between them and a rival community or the wider mnemonic community around (Rintamäki, 2015). Such mnemonic struggles are waged through memory work. Memory work is the activity for institutionalizing or deinstitutionalizing certain types of shared memories by interested actors, and it can be further distinguished into remembering work and forgetting work. Kuhn (2010, 6)<sup>2</sup> conceptualizes remembering work as "an active practice of remembering that takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory." Remembering work refers to the interrogation of mnemonic traces with potentially opaque and inauthentic understandings of the past whose meanings and possibilities may be up to interpretation. Forgetting work (Mena et al., 2015), in turn, is concerned with manipulating past events, silencing mnemonic communities, and undermining mnemonic traces. It "involves purposeful attempts to reconfigure, dilute and thwart the collective memory of an event" (17) and does not necessarily imply intentionality, but "is often the result of a range of activities with different intended time horizons and degrees of intentionality" (18). In effect, forgetting work aims to obscure the past in order to create a particular memory of it, or even erase memories altogether, whereas remembering work aims to bring the past into life and uncover inconsistencies or hidden stories.

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<sup>2</sup> Kuhn (2010) in fact calls this memory work instead of remembering work, but for conceptual reasons I re-label it as remembering work. Memory is the function of both remembering and forgetting, and here the definition refers to practices of recalling or remembering.

As Anteby & Molnar (2012) state, identities are typically not set in the present, but rather they are "part of ongoing historical constructions and collective memories" (517). It follows, they state, that even though there is a considerable literature on identity work, the relationship of identity to an organization's history, particularly when conceptualized as collective memory, has been largely neglected. And moreover, in terms of a legacy organizational identity, there is the question of whether the relationship is to the history *of* the organization or the history *concerning* the organization – what has happened around the organization after its death, how it has come to be seen. What is more is that despite the literature on identity transfer, there is little understanding of what happens to organizational identities over time after organizational death, a very common phenomenon itself. I will attempt to provide illumination to this through the case of Upstart, a tech firm that lived and died in the early 2000s.

## CASE

*"For the moment, they are the leading players in the world of mobile entertainment...666 Working days later, it was all gone. What the fuck happened? Where the fuck did all that money go?"* Narrator in the documentary

*"As you rob a bank, you need, one guy, who can start the talking...third guy, who could handle the guns, and you need a fifth guy who can do the driving away...every person in the gang, had its own role – to get the god damn fucking money"* A founder in the documentary

While there may not be many obviously available cases for investigating the connections between legacy organizational identity and collective memory, the case of Upstart presents an excellent extreme case of a firm whose demise was already some time ago, that had a strong identity during its existence (despite its relatively short lifespan), and that has had legacy organizational identity claims made after its death.

Upstart was founded in early 2000, still in the boom times of the dot-com bubble, typically for the time, with ambitious aspirations and lofty expectations. A group of young men from the entertainment industry had an idea of a mobile gaming firm where the selling point would be based on top of the line entertainment license deals. This model was so popular, and likely the charisma of the founders so intense, that several insiders have since maintained that there were so many willing big-name investors that they could simply choose the one who was willing to offer the most convenient terms.

Upstart managed to raise an eventual sum of upwards of \$20 million in venture capital (and during its course, an undisclosed sum of debt), and secured global contracts so prestigious that such a feat had been unheard of in the Nordics thus far. The firm grew from nothing to a company of more than 100 employees practically overnight, and founded overseas offices (in addition to the reportedly lush headquarters, complete with a cinema and a recreational spa area) to Singapore, Berlin, London, and Los Angeles for example. In other words, Upstart never was a start-up in the way that most people conceive start-ups: a handful of tech-savvy creatives struggling to make ends meet and continuously scrambling for funding. Instead, it immediately became a serious IT firm, at least on paper. The reputation of the firm was such that they received international media exposure to the extent that one of the founders, the CEO, was invited for an interview on NBC.

Although the rise was rapid, actual business deals were made in rather short order, and some parts of the firm even became profitable very quickly, trouble started brewing. There was a fair amount of employee turnover, and the rapid growth combined with an inexperienced management, an already turbulent market and the bursting of the dot-com bubble, along with rumors of a decadent company culture and lax accounting, resulted in increasing investor pressure and skeptical outsider critique. Heavy layoffs were made in late 2001, along with constant restructurings, and a heavy push for another investment round by the founders, Upstart finally yielded and filed for bankruptcy in early 2002. The dream had become a nightmare, and much of the work put in simply vanished in the air. Former members of the organization moved on to other organizations, large and small, within the industry or in completely different industries. Others established their own firms. For some, recovery from the wild ride took years.

One might be tempted to think that this was the end of the story of Upstart, as is typical when a firm dies. However, in 2004, rumors started circulating about a documentary prepared about the firm. The rumors soon became reality as a documentary was released in cinemas in Upstart's home country, and subsequently aired on TV, including a primetime slot on BBC. And while Upstart was rumored to flaunt a rather party-centred working culture at the time of its existence, the portrait painted in the film took these rumors to a different level. Though the story told in the film was somewhat polysemic, the overarching narrative was that of irresponsibility, incompetence, and decadence. The emphasis was on the parties, alcohol, drugs, strippers, prostitutes, sex, and dishonest and generally unethical business practices. And to make the point abundantly clear, references to and metaphors of crime – particularly a bank robbery – were used extensively.

*"I think we should have hired bigger, better, stronger criminals and we would have made it."* A founder in the documentary referring to the (accidental) hiring of a person wanted by the FBI

Most importantly, the narrative put forth in the documentary was widely adopted by the media, and consequently, the wider public. With the wide-scale exposure the documentary received, it served to unravel Upstart, or at least a particular version of it, to the general public, and industry members especially – at least for a time. Through the story told in the documentary, the founders of the firm were effectively making a legacy organizational identity claim for Upstart. However, this identity claim was contested by a number of former members of Upstart, e.g. through legal threats – one former employee arrived in the premiere of the documentary with a lawyer – and appearances in television talk shows, as well as through participation in internet discussions. In fact, the impact of the documentary, and its identity claim in particular, seemed to have been so forceful that it has become an anchor through (or against) which most former Upstarters form their present legacy identity claims of the organization as it was. As one interviewee put it:

*"[The film] of course shapes the image that outsiders have of Upstarters, but I do remember that it also heavily shaped the image Upstart employees had about the issue."* U5 in an interview

Discussions with former Upstarters revealed that competing legacy identity claims still exist in narrative form. In order to investigate these identity claims, I conducted a narrative analysis mainly focusing on the interview materials and the documentary, but also to some extent on media materials.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

**Interview data.** As the primary data source I have conducted 17 interviews with former members of Upstart from all levels of the firm. The interviews were semi-structured and relatively informal so as to encourage the interviewees to tell their story of the firm. In order to get a thorough sample of work experiences at Upstart, I interviewed individuals from all levels of the firm, including software developers, support function personnel, producers, marketing managers, and executive management. Three of the interviewees were part of top management at some point of their tenure at Upstart. All except for one interviewee were at the company at the time of bankruptcy, when there were approximately 50 employees at the firm. All except one were at Upstart approximately from the beginning until the end, meaning the sample is quite representative of that core group of people at the firm.

The duration of the interviews varied from 60 minutes to up to 150 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted following a standard structure, but some deviations were made in each interview in terms of question order and topics of discussion. The questions concerned career autobiographies of the interviewees along with their stated work identities, their memories of Upstart, the people working there and the stories they would like to tell about it, and their reactions to and feelings about the documentary film. As themes started emerging after the first few interviews, I started emphasizing on the key questions and issues that typically yielded the most fruitful conversations. This was done in order to capture as many nuances as possible on the key topics from all interviewees. The interviews were conducted in order to construct an understanding of the legacy organizational identity claims among former members of Upstart.

**Other data.** Secondary data consists of interviews with two people who were closely related to Upstart, media articles related to Upstart numbering more than 80 from the founding of the firm until the time of writing, autobiographical books about IT-start-ups during the dot-com bubble, online materials such as blogs, LinkedIn profiles, discussion boards and comment sections to media articles, and importantly, a documentary that was produced by a number of former members of Upstart, with notably two company founders as the producers. The purpose of the auxiliary interviews and the media material was to get an understanding of the case, as well as a thorough picture of the public's understanding of Upstart. The documentary, in addition to that purpose, is an important vehicle for legacy identity work conducted by members of former firm top management, but also comprises an important lens into the publicly accepted story of Upstart.

The research process consisted of three phases. The first phase of the research process took place over a span of two months in late 2014. This included collection of publicly available documents from over the years concerning Upstart, as well as a video documentary about the firm, in order to get familiar with the case and get a picture of the generally accepted story of the firm. The documentary and the media materials helped me form a basic understanding of the case and its operating context, and at this point I constructed a timeline for the case, including both the time of existence and the time after bankruptcy. Although initially I thought I was going into a case as described in the documentary and some of the key media pieces, examining online discussions and reading a six-part blog series by a former Upstarter revealed that the extent of disagreement as to what Upstart was, was much greater than I had previously thought. During this phase, I was preparing for the interviews by tracking down



former Upstarters through social media, media articles, internet discussions, and the participant list of the documentary. Based on the observations I had made while investigating the publicly available materials, particularly concerning the polysemy and contestations, I prepared the interview structures so as to emphasize to the interviewees to tell their story; their version or memory of Upstart was. I also made the decision to reserve a significant role for the documentary in the interview structure, asking the interviewees of the documentary's significance as well as to reflect it to the story they would have told. These decisions were made in order to catch the polysemy of the identity narratives concerning the legacy of Upstart, as well as to capture the relationship of the documentary and the occupational identities of the interviewees.

The second phase took place in the spring of 2015, and consisted of conducting interviews with individuals who were either employed or closely involved with Upstart during its existence, collecting additional secondary data on Upstart, as well as media data on other similar cases), and finally, analysis of the data during and after collection. I focused on contacting people who had spent a long time at the firm, preferably from the beginning to the end in order to get rich data and for the interviewees to have shared a similar time period at the firm. To get an idea of how long each candidate had been employed at Upstart, I used both LinkedIn and later the interviewees as well. In between interviews and analysis I transcribed the interviews and searched for signs of identity claims with points of similarity and points of difference in mind. Initially I thematically coded the interviews and the documentary according to emergent first-order categories on the legacy identity of Upstart. In this phase, it became clear that there were indeed competing narratives about what Upstart had been about, and some of the contestations of the legacy identity claims were still vehement. At this point from the first-order categories, four second-order legacy organizational identity claims (more on them in the next section) were starting to emerge from the interview data along with the documentary and other personal testimonies of former Upstarters. Following this emergence, I also coded the interviews according to the four emergent legacy identity claims in order to make clearer sense of the fragmentation or the identity claims. See Figure 1.

The third and final research phase took place from spring to autumn of 2015, and it involved going back and forth with the data and research writing, as well as fine-tuning the legacy identity claims. At this phase the image of a four-fold fragmentation of the legacy organizational identity solidified through reiterations of transcribed interviews, media stories,

and the documentary. I also disguised the firm and the interviewees at this stage, and grouped the interviewees according to their identity claims, and how they related to the identity claim made in the documentary. This is the point where the key narratives in terms of legacy organizational identity of Upstart had become rather well defined.

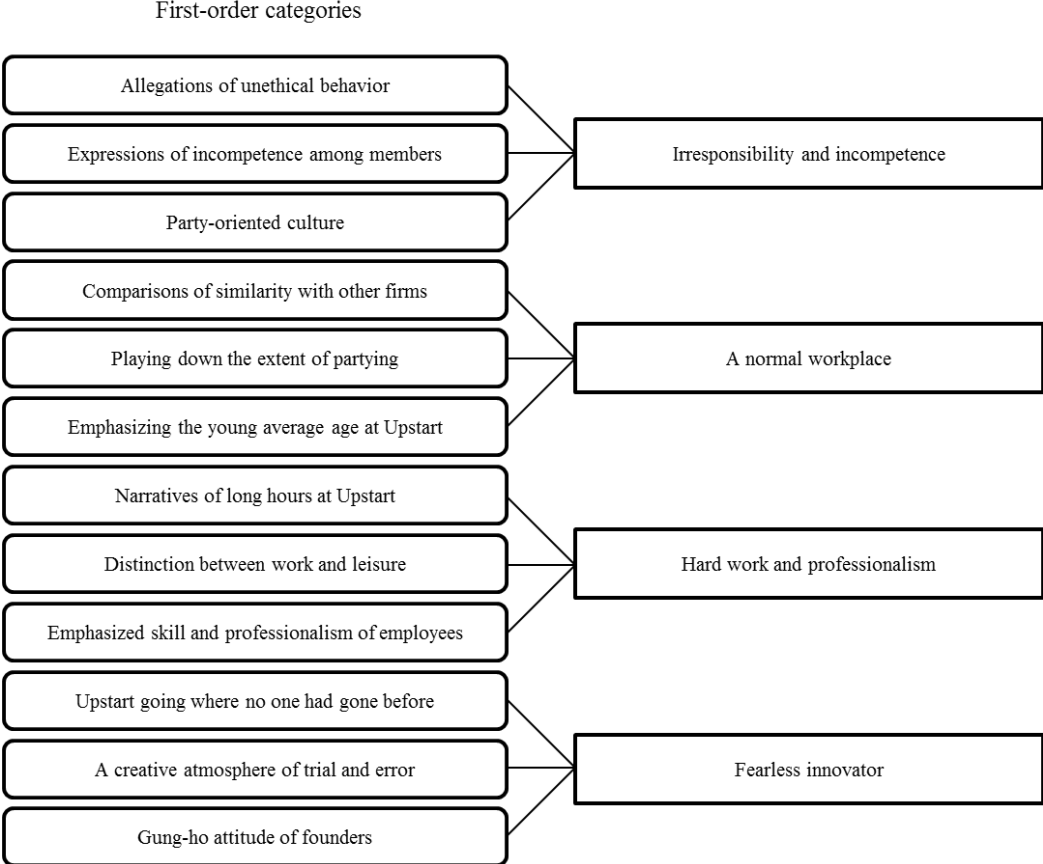


Figure 4. First-order categories and legacy identity claims.

**Method.** Narrative approaches have for a considerable time been an important part of the toolkit for organizational research (Boje, 1991; 2001; Gabriel, 2001; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). While having for a long time been a common approach to studies on organizational identity (Brown, 2006), some recent work on memory and organizations (Adorisio, 2014) has shown the usefulness of such methods in understanding collective memory in organizations as well. Typically, collective memories manifest and are passed on as stories and narratives (Decker, 2014): commemorations of past events typically involve tellings of particular stories, or recounting particular versions of past events, and even without specific commemoration, important past events are revisited from time to time. Ursula Le Guin (1989, 38, cited in

Bardon et al., 2014) on the other hand has described narratives as a language that is used in connecting events in time. Indeed, Brockmeier (2002) has stated that memory practices are in fact narrative practices, lending further credibility for the usefulness of narrative and storytelling approaches to the study of (collective) memory in organizations.

Similarly, narrative approaches have a strong presence in studies of identity in and of organizations. In fact, as Gergen & Gergen (1988) point out, in organization studies it is common to refer to identity as a form of self-narrative. Humphreys & Brown (2002) in turn argue that organizational identities, too, are narrative constructions that evolve over time, advocating narrative approaches for the study of organizational identities. Furthermore, Gerstroem (2015) has argued a narrative approach to be particularly useful for analyzing legacy organizational identities, as the narrative specifically take into account the contradictions and multiplicity that members of dead organizations perceive, and because the narrative approach embraces difference in perceptions about the past 'self' of the organization.

As Rhodes & Brown (2005) point out, narrative approaches to studying organizations emphasize the perspectival nature of 'knowledge' of organizations. Both the respondent and the scholar participate in the generation of narratives (of narratives), and thus understanding is a result of subjective interaction between the respondent and the scholar. As a result, through narratives, organizations are can be represented in the multiplicity of ways that individuals can construct meaning and identity from organizational events and experiences.

As explained, a narrative approach was chosen in a large part due to both memory and identity typically manifesting as narratives. In this study, I conceptualize Upstart as a case of legacy organizational identity struggle, where on the one hand a powerful, public identity claim was made by members of former top management, followed by strong disidentification by former organization members. In order to illustrate and analyze Upstart as such a case, I set out to identify narratives concerning the identity claim made in the documentary, the competing organizational legacy identity claims, descriptions of identifying or disidentifying with said identity claims, and descriptions of professional identities, particularly in relation to Upstart. In short, I analyzed narratives of what Upstart was for the various parties involved.

## **FRAGMENTATION OF LEGACY ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY**

Upstart is a case of bankruptcy following what was perceived irresponsibility and incompetence. The media attention and the imposition of a particular version of the story of Upstart by the founders caused ruptures among the former members of Upstart. In particular, it created a rift between the founders behind the documentary and other former Upstarters, as

witnessed in the the following statement in an interview with a former Upstarter:

*"And so it's, the way things stand is that I still wouldn't greet [a founder/documentary producer] and a few others if I saw them, it still weighs on me like that after 15 years. Wish it had even been a good flick."* U11 in an interview

But along with creating a rift, it appears the documentary functions as a type of an anchor for a variety of memories of Upstart; some are constructed against it, others through it. As a reaction to the documentary, and based on their memories of the firm, Upstarters articulate alternative legacy organizational identity claims. Altogether, four different legacy organizational identity claims were made, as narrated below and demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 3. Quotes representing the different legacy organizational identity claims.

<b>Representative quotes</b>	
<b>Identity claim 1: Irresponsibility and incompetence</b>	
Allegations of unethical behavior	<i>"Extreme liar, extreme bluffer...there's something almost holy about that"</i>
	<i>"[impersonating the CEO] I was lying to the left, I was lying to the right...and at the same time, I was making sandwiches. And you know what [addressing another founder], I have come to the conclusion, that a lie is not a lie, until it is revealed to be a lie."</i>
Expressions of incompetence among members	<i>"[because of the big investors] in a way, we should have got the best people. But for some reason we got like relatives, we got alcoholics, (couples), nymphomaniacs, (siblings), desperate self-supporting mothers, (childhood friends), I think some guys were actually taken from the bus stop...and some girls were hired just for sexual habit. So we had the number filled, quota, one hundred"</i>
Party-oriented culture	<i>"[the financial controller, founder] was concerned that the vice president was building this mountain of stripper receipts...[vice president] arranges a trip to Spain with [financial controller], comes back, and is like hey it's all fine now, we banged 4 hookers together."</i>
	<i>"I came to work, and I saw these coders walk around in bath robes. [shrugging nonchalantly] Drunk."</i>
<b>Identity claim 2: A workplace like any other</b>	
Comparisons of similarity to other firms	<i>"And compared to these [other IT-firms], I don't remember what the name of that one portal was, what we did was child's play. So without that flick, we'd be just as sexy as [a lower-profile dot-com bubble firm]."</i>
	<i>"And in the same building, I think we had [an investment bank] office,</i>

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*and I think those guys drank much more with the bank's money than we did, but afterwards we were given the image that we were hardly ever sober."*

*"All the elements were there, yeah. Lots of money, and then booze and women and everything. And if as a workplace you think what kinds of things were organized by the company, then I don't think it really deviated from a normal, or any workplace, like we had Christmas parties and summer parties and so on. And then there were similar types of people around town, there were other IT firms who had received a lot of money, so the whole atmosphere in town was a bit different."*

Playing down the extent of partying

*"I didn't notice back then that we would have somehow thought to have partied particularly heavily. I think that there the flick has steered people's own thoughts as well. That when they were kind of reminding you [of the parties] in the flick, you were like, holy moly, was that what it was like?"*

*"I think I've probably been to two parties and even in them I probably paid for my own drinks, so those talks [about constant partying] really were off the wall."*

Emphasizing the young average age at Upstart

*"And now that all started comparing that partying to now when we're some years older, well a healthy person typically parties less than he or she did ten years ago."*

*"So yeah, pretty often we used to go for a beer after work and then some of the people got back to work and, well, maybe it was my life situation [this person had a young child] and that I wasn't new to these things. You know, having played in a rock band and been on the road, made movies, I've sometimes chuckled at the talks of how wild things were supposed to have been [at Upstart]. What it was was what it's like when young people get to do things together without adult supervision, so what do you think it's going to be."*

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### Identity claim 3: Hard work and professionalism

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Narratives of long hours

*"Well of course I can speak for myself that at times [working hours] were around the clock, but then at other times it was a bit more relaxed, but we worked quite a lot."*

*"The only thing that I thought was bad was that I didn't really know how to keep tabs on my work hours, and of course they threw everything at me that they could, and at the end I had worked 700 hours overtime in a period of six months, so I had basically lived at the office, doing something all the time."*

Distinction between work and

*"Of course at times we just hung out, and probably sometimes you got the impression that some people were living there, so what counted as*

leisure	<p><i>work and what as something else? But we did a lot, and I was keeping track of my hours as well even though they didn't pay compensation for overtime, the wages were pretty good as things stood."</i></p> <p><i>"Of course it was the type of time that everyday life has probably been pretty rowdy among that crowd, but then again that had nothing to do with the employer except that the friends were from there."</i></p>
Emphasized skill and professionalism of employees	<p><i>"But if people were made to believe we nepotistically hired all sorts of fools to drink and fuck each other, then that doesn't correspond to the truth at all in my opinion, I think that smearing, I didn't like it at all. Not so much for my own sake, or partially for my own sake as well, but for the sake of others especially. Because the talent there was so palpable, and most people really didn't, I mean most people worked very hard, sometimes with high competence too, but especially very hard."</i></p> <p><i>"Let's put it like this, at [Upstart], things were done. There really was a bunch of super professionals, like none of them was incompetent, that I can tell you. Everyone was...very competent, each and every one, and all of that was kind of new but still everybody worked for the thing to move forward, so not one person was slacking, so that was nice, that the atmosphere was efficient."</i></p>

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Identity claim 4: Fearless innovator

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Upstart going where no one had gone before	<p><i>"We went in as pioneers to teach, we paid the costs for learning. But of course the investors don't get that we're teaching the world a new thing that takes more than two years of time."</i></p> <p><i>"So we were really six years ahead, and usually it's the US that drives technology. So this was the problem in my opinion, that there was a lot of potential in this, and the only thing that was messed up was that the financiers didn't wanna put more money in the burn rate, because [the management] couldn't convince the financiers that this is what's going to happen – no one could see the future."</i></p>
A creative atmosphere of trial and error	<p><i>"...that fearlessness and courage were the keywords there. Failure was not something to be feared, and generally [failing] is more likely. We knew that we had to try that, that, that, that, and that if we want to get there."</i></p> <p><i>"I thought the work atmosphere was pretty awesome. Likeminded, very young people, like completely fearless, all cynicism and everything that comes later in working life when you learn to understand what this is all about, that was nowhere to be found especially in the beginning. There were of course some pretty disturbed, really different, weird people so sparks would fly as well, but I thought those sparks were the positive type. Kind of like creative defiance and creative destruction, a combination of these. I thought it was really fascinating."</i></p>

Gung-ho attitude  
of founders

*"The founders all get together, get a great idea, they don't put any money in it, not even credit-card based money at that time, they go out, put together a business plan, pitch to someone as large as Nokia Ventures, and have it befunded."*

*"Of course the founders were a pretty confident bunch, so they were building [the rock star spirit] inside as well, so no pulling brakes there, but instead more fuel to the fire. So some sort of hubris there."*

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### ***Legacy identity claim 1: Irresponsibility and incompetence***

The documentary on Upstart proposed a very particular identity claim that portrayed Upstart as a fearless and innovative, yet deeply flawed, reckless, and irresponsible firm, which seemed simultaneously close to success and never anywhere near it. The strongest and most widely propagated identity claim is made in the documentary concerns the latter prospect, and this claim was also made, upheld, and reinforced by certain former Upstarters. This identity claim presents Upstart as a firm of raucous parties, reckless abandon, and as a story of resistance to, even ridicule of more traditional corporate identities. The narratives in this identity claim involve belittling of the amount and quality of work done at Upstart as well as the ability of its workforce, promotion of the amount and intensity of parties, and highlighting of the unethical and irresponsible activities and practices at the firm. This legacy identity claim presents Upstart as a reckless, damaging jumble of incompetence and irresponsibility; as a veritable "Flying Dutchman" of the dot-com bubble era, "taking those lost at sea to watery grave" as one former Upstarter muses. Indeed, the documentary was full of quotes referring to such an identity, as evidenced by the following quotes:

*"In a way, you could say, we created this team, to commit a crime"* A founder in the documentary

*"Of course there was a lot of boozing also."* An employee in the documentary

*"Nobody could ever answer any of the questions, even simple questions like what is the character set used in SMS messages, nobody knows...how can it be that [an organization in this business and these resources] nobody knows about the technology? I don't know what they were smoking most of the time [chuckling]"* An employee in the documentary

*"A lot of money was wasted in [Upstart]. Now thinking afterwards, on very foolish things and way too carelessly."* An employee in the documentary

In these quotes, allegations of unethical behavior are voiced in the corporate management claiming to have lied to their funders and used company funds to hire strippers, and by inference prostitutes as well. Repeated mentions of lack of competence (technological and otherwise) among Upstart workforce were made, while excessive partying and the use of alcohol (and other substances) were emphasized at several turns. And such an identity was not left only for the private viewer to ponder, but the press took a similar impression of the firm post-documentary, and propagated it to the wider public, as evidenced by the following quote:

*"In any case I get perverse joy out of the fact that Rupert Murdoch and George W. Bush have financed the drunken nude parties of a bunch of [Nordic] IT weirdos in [a recreation center]."* The editor-in-chief of a monthly magazine in the editorial in September 2004

Some of the former members of Upstart also share this identity claim, although they are in the minority. A few of them thought the documentary was accurate (although some thought that while it was rather accurate, it strongly represented only one perspective), while a few others thought the documentary left the most scandalous events out, and was in fact being very soft on the company culture. Many of these identity claims are rooted in the documentary in that they are narrated as a juxtaposition with the identity claims made in the film, even if the memories of the firm are their own (while of course being subject to cultural and instrumental processes connected to collective memory, as well as the passage of time; see Misztal, 2003, 50-76). This identity claim is expressed in the following quotes:

*"So, the kind, I guess one concrete example of this was, you know once a week we had this, maybe even more, I can't remember, we had these morning meetings in the meeting room with most of the company present. And people would kinda sit around a table and kick around ideas and the meetings would take place around 9 or 10am, and usually these meetings have coffee that people would drink, but instead there was beer and cider and what other alcohol beverages, and you know, I don't think there were strong liquors, but people certainly were allowed to drink as much as they wanted, and some people did, and then they would maybe have a bit of a nap after lunch, and only get back to work in the evening."* U4 in an interview

*"...it was a very good documentary, one that I would have wanted to do myself, where you paint with a broad brush. The real stories would have been even more delicious, but you can't take things that deep everywhere."* U14 in an interview



### ***Legacy identity claim 2: A workplace like any other***

There were other types of identity claims made too. A more moderate identity claim accepts parts of the claim made in the documentary, while emphasizing some of the contextual factors related to the firm's situation at the time, such as the average age of employees and the general spirit of times, nowadays best captured by the terms 'dotcom bubble' and 'the new economy'. But at the same time, members of this group firmly reject the claims of outrageous party life at the firm, and typically the illegitimate activities, too.

One of these more moderate identity claims is manifested in memories of Upstart as a firm like any other, sometimes further reinforced by work experiences that have followed. These claims situate the firm in its context (the dot-com bubble) on the one hand, while express critique on organizational life in general on the other. These claims are witnessed in the quotes that follow:

*"So it has been a shock that immediately after [Upstart] when I worked with teleoperators, [IT-corporations], tractor manufacturers and who knows what, I noticed that they do things just as stupidly, but they just don't have as much dough. That might be the reason why they may notice those things more quickly, but even they can't fix them in any way. So a terribly many places are, as we've talked, exactly like [Upstart] but just without the money. That has really stuck to my mind, that even large [local] firms seem to be managed and steered forward just as weirdly [as Upstart]."*

U13 in an interview

So on the one hand Upstart was compared to any other organization in terms of parties and free time activities, and in particular such comparisons were made to other IT firms. Some interviewees singled out IT firms at that time: it was the dot-com era, and some IT firms in that era of relatively loose money were considered by them to have been much rowdier as far as parties went, thus playing down the claims of an excessively party-oriented atmosphere at Upstart. On the other hand, some interviewees generally felt many other organizations they had worked in before or after were very similar to Upstart with all the pros and cons that come with working at business organizations (bureaucracy etc.). Some also pointed out that even of the partying that occurred, much was to be explained by the young average age of Upstarters; any person in his or her 20s, as most Upstarters were, will likely party more at that age than when they are older, as people tend to be in most organizations.

### ***Legacy identity claim 3: Hard work and professional expertise***

Another identity claim that clashed perhaps the most heavily with the one made in the film is that of Upstart as a firm with high levels of professionalism and expertise, characterized by hard work of the personnel. Former Upstarters who made this legacy organizational claim for Upstart were particularly antagonized by several of the allegations made in the documentary, and especially the identity claim of Upstart as an irresponsible, reckless, dishonest swindler. To many of them, such properties did not represent Upstart at all and thus they did not identify with such an identity claim, even though some were willing to associate such traits to some of the founders. Instead, these individuals emphasized the hard work that the employees put in at the firm, and the professional expertise that the members of the organization possessed. This legacy organizational identity claim is illustrated in the following quote:

*"I worked pretty much around the clock. Afterwards I've been wondering why I ever worked so much, I could have worked much less and done a lot less work [the interviewee later burned out while at Upstart]." U2 in an interview*

Many interviewees thus emphasized the long hours put in at Upstart, including nights spent at the firm with sleeping bags under desks. At the same time many were keen to remind that not all of the time spent at the office was work, but that the office was also a site for leisure where people would bring friends on weekends. Thus, some emphasize, most of the time when people may have partied at company premises – the spa area in particular – it was not in fact related to work, even if firm premises and colleagues were involved. Most interviewees, contrary to claims in the documentary, also emphasized the skill and expertise of the personnel at the firm, whether it was in software development or marketing – the areas where most interviewees thought Upstart was particularly competent in.

#### ***Legacy identity claim 4: Fearless innovator***

While most of the identity claims made in the film are still resisted by many former Upstarters, the other one made in the film, although with less force, of Upstart as a fearless innovator that almost succeeded, resonates with many former members of the organization. Although the film constantly flirts with themes that depict recklessness, carelessness, raucousness, and even an anti-business attitude, one recurring theme is that of the courage that seemed to have been inherent to the firm, from its "ballsy" founders to its never-say-die developers, as is evidenced in the following quotes from different parts of the film:

*"One of [the CEO's] favorite phrases was, there is normal speed, there is light speed, and there is [Upstart] speed." A founder, in the documentary*

Though many former employees disagreed with several of the identity claims made in the film, this claim of fearlessness, courage, and ambition was shared by many of the employees. This facet of Upstart evoked wistful memories of the firm as the one organization that had the daring to go where others had not, and to reach for the stars with no fear of what the alternatives might be. The perceived fearlessness and courage was also expressed as a great source of pride by many former members of the organization, and was something many wished for their current organizations to have, and something that most perceived to have taken with them from Upstart and utilizing in their working life that has followed. The identity claim of courage and fearlessness as expressed by former employees is illustrated in the following quotes:

*"It didn't fear, no one was afraid of anything, it was bold, dared to take risks, well the only thing we ever did was take risks. And the successes, they were all celebrated."*

U10 in an interview

Several of the interviewees emphasized the feeling of having been on a frontier: Upstart going where no firm had ever gone before. This was to an extent connected to an admiration of some of the qualities of the founders, particularly their boldness in reaching for the stars and creating something very big with Upstart. At the same time, the work atmosphere in general was praised particularly for the trial-and-error approach to problems and the general liberty given to employees in going about their jobs.

## **ENDURING AND CHANGING LEGACY**

While it is difficult to make post-hoc assessments of the point of time when the fracturing of organizational identity accelerated or took a forward leap in the case of Upstart, this particular case has the catalytic moment of the publishing of the documentary, which triggered mnemonic struggles among different groups of former organizational members, and thus has likely also kickstarted a great amount of identity work among them. With the split collective memory and the imposed sense of stigma on former Upstarters, the legacy organizational identity seems to have fractured as well in the aftermath of the release of the documentary. Some have with glee taken up the identity offered in the film, while others have stood in staunch opposition to such proposals, and held onto or developed entirely different legacy identities, or fragments thereof, of Upstart.

As could be predicted based on the analysis of Gerstroem (2015), some identity claims have remained stronger, while others have diluted over time. However, what has happened with

Upstart has gone further than just the strength of an identity claim (although that certainly plays a part too). There are in fact different, competing, and sometimes overlapping identity claims based on the different memories different groups of former members have of the firm. While not a particularly popular identity claim among former Upstarters, the one of Upstart as an irresponsible, incompetent, unprofessional firm, received widespread propagation and became the primary identity of Upstart as perceived by outsiders, including the wider public. The firm was ridiculed on internet comment sections and message boards, and even today gets mentioned by internet commenters in connection reckless IT firm behavior. Such sentiments are evidenced in the following quotes:

*“For a large part the antics at [Upstart] look so absurd to an outsider that the fooleries there do not really need any critical highlighting. [The documentary] tells everything necessary about the mentality of the era it depicts as it is.”* A journalist in a blog, on the documentary in 2004

*“Upstart created actual things after all, though its achievements became accessory compared to the splurging, partying, and megalomaniacal plans connected to it in the public.”* An IT journalist in 2012, comparing Upstart to another then-imminent notable IT bankruptcy

*“We’ve seen these before. ‘Have I really?’ Loads of them. Or have you forgotten a company called [Upstart in IT]? [Investors] sank some tens of millions of cash into it because the idea was so great. [Large global venture capital investors] put money into their bank account at such a rate that [Upstart] was barely able to burn through it.”* A popular blogger comparing Upstart to Zalando, which he considered a monumental failure waiting to happen, in 2013

And as identity is a relational construct, this imposition of a legacy identity claim came to bear a variety of consequences for former Upstarters, but perhaps also for the general perception of the dot-com bubble in Upstart's country of origin as witnessed in one of the quotations above. However, it is the consequences that are of interest here. One of the consequences, as has been demonstrated above, was the fragmentation of the legacy identity of Upstart. Looking at the relatively peaceful, even prosperous time for Upstarters between the bankruptcy and the release of the documentary, one would venture that, in line with previous literature (Gerstroem, 2015; Walsh & Glynn, 2008), there likely was a certain shared understanding of the legacy of Upstart. As a result of the memory work conducted in the form of the documentary, such a shared understanding – the legacy identity of Upstart – fragmented

into several competing identity claims, discussed in the previous section.

This partitioning of legacy organizational identity claims, as a result of memory work, goes against the predictions of Walsh & Glynn (2008) that there would be a particular legacy identity of an organization that would survive the death of an organization. Instead, there is a fragmented legacy identity of Upstart where the dominant claim itself has taken a bit of a life of its own, as it has come to be seen differently in recent years than immediately after the release of the documentary, as perceived by former Upstarters. Several former Upstarters claim – despite what some IT journalists think, as remarked above – that in recent years Upstart has developed a kind of a heroic aura instead of a purely scandalous one, as evidenced by some interviewees:

*“But now we're in the post-documentary era, now that this much time has passed, and that has changed, the flick is remembered differently. Now there's this weird, undefinable sense of admiration [for it].”* U5 in an interview

*“Yeah sometime after [the documentary], a long time had passed, so in Chamonix [someone] recognized me and put up a full-on fan act, so we took fan photos there and stuff, so both were in it with a positive attitude, and so this was probably ten years after.”* U3 in an interview

Some of the former Upstarters attribute this to changing cultural norms in the society, as clearly expressed by one interviewee:

*“Partly one of the things that is related to [Upstart] and surely people's memories of it is this start-up boom that's going on right now[...]everybody understands that if we don't get these small firms then we're all gonna be in trouble.”* U5 in an interview

This fragmentation of the legacy organizational identity and its adapting to cultural norms is consistent with theory and research of collective memory. Mnemonic struggles are the norm, and some form of fragmentation of memories of past (contested) events typically takes place over time (Misztal, 2003). Meanwhile, Schudson (1992, 53-55) among others has emphasized the importance of cultural forces in the formation and reconfiguration of collective memories, as cultural norms largely determine what is good, what is accepted, what is bad and so on. This finding goes further than Gerstroom's (2015) empirical finding that stronger and weaker legacy identity claims are left behind by an organization. Instead, here, following an unusually strong push of a particular identity claim, we see fragments of an identity that perhaps once was. This process is depicted in Figure 2.

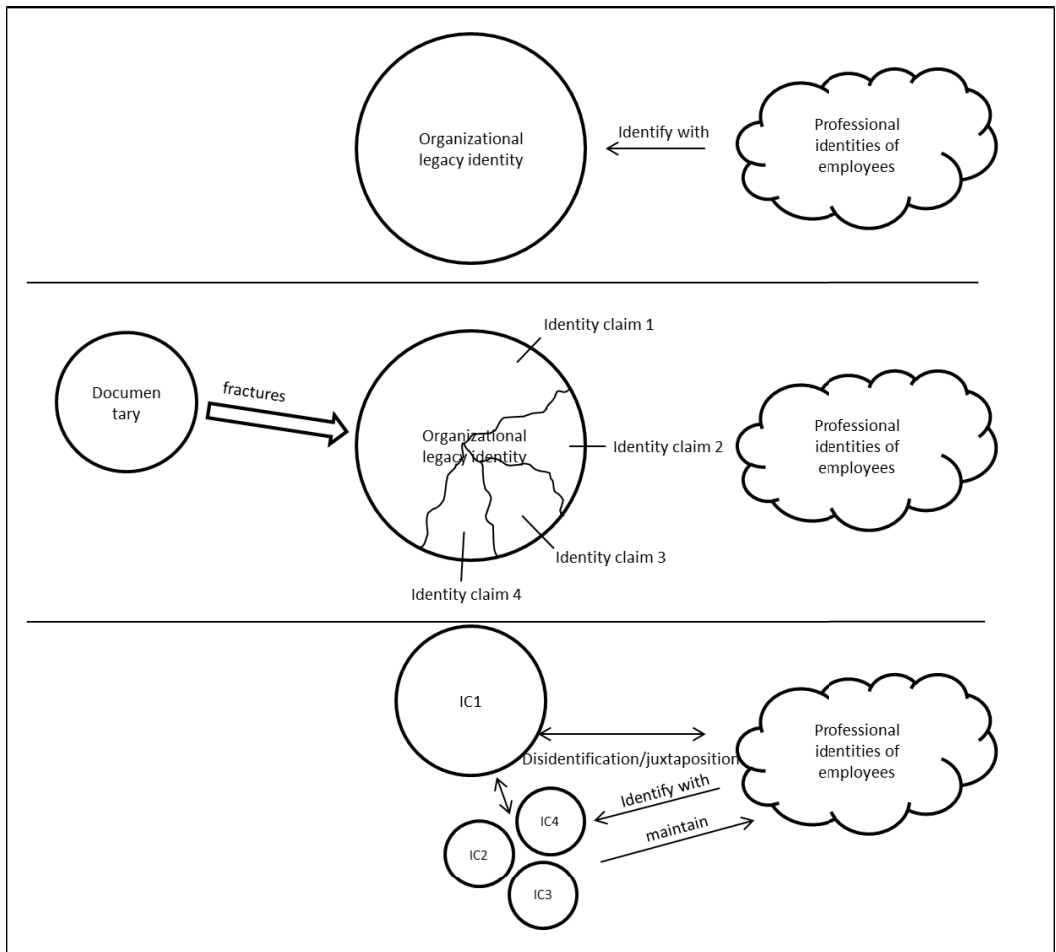


Figure 5. Fragmentation of legacy organizational identity and its interaction with work identities.

## IMPACTED OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITIES

This fragmentation of the legacy organizational identity took place as a result of a strong disidentification with the identity claim made in the documentary: many former employees started did not want to be affiliated with an organization that was depicted in the film. At the same time, they did identify strongly with what they thought Upstart was. Having had to cope with the identity claims made from the outside, and understood as such by bystanders, they articulated competing identity claims to counter the claim made in the documentary, as discussed in the previous section (see Figure 2). This is evident in the variety of statements by interviewees about what Upstart was, made as a direct reaction to the claims made in the documentary, as can be seen in Table 1.

Former Upstarters did not develop competing identity claims only to rescue the image of their former employer in the eyes of others, but also to maintain their own work identities that many interviewees thought were jeopardized by the claims made in the film. Some founded companies off the back of Upstart, while others moved on within the industry based on the expertise gained at Upstart. When the documentary started receiving airtime and attracted attention from the press, many felt their post-Upstart projects were threatened, and in particular their work identities, as illustrated in a statement by a former Upstarter:

*"Have to say that I still tread with care with [post-documentary Upstart], or like it's not the first thing you bring up from your CV. Probably there hasn't been any great disadvantage in practice, but it still kind of felt like a thing you just don't want to highlight in your personal history. In terms of your professional expertise, it's the reputation that counts, so [Upstart] is not the first thing you mention [now that people have seen the film]." U13 in an interview*

Similarly, others who had founded their own firms off the legacy or Upstart felt their new projects were in danger, as it was their work identities that were embodied in the new firms that were (being) established:

*"And that was one thing that, right now we won't put [Upstart] as one of the firms in our investor papers because it has such a stigmatic stamp on it; you just can't put it there because they'll think we'll just splurge the money, somehow that stigma always comes along. That's why I have [names of other former employees] in there." U6 in an interview*

*"So we had to be prepared that people would laugh at us even more than before, and this firm of ours had barely made a break at that point. And you didn't really know how badly we were going to get shamed here." U11 in an interview*

The quotes above demonstrate the problems many former Upstarters had with the identity claim made in the film, and how they refused to identify their individual work identities with it. Certainly it would be difficult for most to professionally identify with an organizational identity of irresponsibility and incompetence. But even while they detested the legacy organizational identity claims made in the film, many at the same time expressed their own work identities through or against that identity claim, much like they did with the competing legacy organizational identity claims. Others expressed clear influence by how they remember

Upstart – the type of legacy identity they claim for the firm – on their work identities. Of the former, some exemplary quotes will follow:

*”And then you often consider whether you dare put [Upstart] on your CV, but I’ve always kept it there, so if someone starts doubting whether I’ve done any work there or anything, I’ll set them straight because, some have doubted, let’s say when you go to larger firms and the like who don’t know the background and have only seen it as a bad type of hype, then they will have strong prejudices, and will only see it as a negative thing and that we were just horsing around there. But when I tell it as it really was, then they will see that work was actually done there after all.”* U6 in an interview

And similarly, many interviewees described their work selves as they would describe Upstart as well, how those features that they cherish are now part of their work identities.

*”But still when I look at my CV, [Upstart] is the most meaningful thing for me and my career that’s in there. It makes me somehow special. That’s how I feel. Without it I would be, I would be just another journalist/script writer/producer, and now director. But I would be missing that something that makes me special[...]Courage and fearlessness are things that I’ve taken with me, that have actually been the ingredients to what I’m doing now, and where I am now. Those are the ones. And then, like, you know, a kind of a belief in your own potential. That I can make an impact, that I can do, pretty much anything. That you refuse to submit to being dictated and chained by your environment.”* U10 in an interview

*”But maybe in a way it shows as a sort of cynicism, meaning I have little tolerance for feely touchy idea bouncing where the end result is lots of bullet points on a powerpoint that we can sell this, but no promise of having any substance that you can actually do it, or that the people throwing ideas around could actually take it somewhere concrete. So every time something like that comes up, my tolerance is very low. I think that’s partly because of [Upstart].”* U13 in an interview

*”So I believe I was the youngest [Upstart] employee. In a way the whole experience on the one hand made me realize a lot people in the corporate world don’t what they’re doing, or at least that was the perception I had, and on the other hand, like I kind of came away from the whole thing with a very sort of a positive experience that a small team can achieve a lot, and start-ups were cool and I’ve worked in start-ups ever since. And you know, I started my first start-up during [Upstart].”* U4 in an interview



The last of the interviewees quoted above has later become a serial entrepreneur, which has become the core of his work identity as well, as he e.g. consistently participates and gives talks in IT start-up fairs, even about Upstart. As the quote above indicates, the adoption of that identity was largely due to his time spent at Upstart. Similar notions are expressed even in characterizing the identities of firms former Upstarters have founded after Upstart: how their identities are defined through or against the legacy identity of Upstart.

*“But when it came to building and developing [our own] firm, it was more like doing everything exactly the opposite from how things were done in Upstart, that was really the starting point. So the way Upstart was built, at least that's the impression I got, was that the only options were to either crash into a wall at full speed or become a global success, that there was no chance that it would be cut down in size and be made into a small business and see what comes of that, but that with the money that we have, we go and either sell it for a billion or bury it. So our starting point was that let's just do it by the three of us, and the primary aim was to make a living to ourselves with not a thought about possibly selling the firm at some point. So in that sense it was completely the opposite. And then how we've grown and built from that, so if [Upstart] was uncontrolled chaos in many ways, then this has been very controlled, as accurate project management as possible. And I don't know if this is because you saw the other side, or because this is in fact the way you would have wanted to do it yourself.” U3 in an interview*

On a similar note, one former Upstarter who now runs a successful software firm echoes those sentiments in a 2013 interview, excerpted below:

*“- You learned well there what you do not want to do. With that money you could have made very good [software].*

*[...]*

*According to [this person], the story of [Upstart] will not repeat itself. This time, the future of the firm is based on realistic calculations.*

*[...]*

*[His] the lessons from [Upstart] are in good memory: all the funding will be used for [software] development, and rather than hiring lots of people at the cost of expertise, they will take longer to make their [products] with a smaller team.*

*[He] admits that lessons have been learned.*

- *Although I would rather bury all thoughts of [Upstart].*” A former Upstarter in a newspaper interview

Both former Upstarters emphasize the role of Upstart in how they have formed their present firms: in the stated ways, the exact opposite to what Upstart was. In this way, the legacy identity of Upstart has made its way into new organizations that were founded from the ashes of Upstart. Interestingly, one former Upstarter compares the legacy identity of Upstart to that of another IT firm from the same era, contrasting them with each other and laments solidity of the competing firm’s legacy identity:

*“I must say that you tread with certain care [when discussing Upstart], or it’s not the first thing you’ll dig out of your CV. There probably wasn’t much harm in practice, but it still felt a bit like a thing you’re not that fond of telling about your personal history. After all, it is precisely reputation that matters for your professional expertise, [Upstart] is not something that will exactly boost that. If you think about, from the same era, people who used to work for [WareSoft], they still have the identity pretty clear amongst each other that these are the former [WareSofters], and then on the other hand these guys give you the image that they were some kind of elite or ace workers back then. And for the ones that I know from that company, they’ve probably been exactly that, so at least there’s that sort of a difference in how people relate to them.”* U13 in an interview

In sum, several former Upstarters highlight the significance of the legacy organizational identity of Upstart, particularly in connection with the legacy identity claim made in the documentary. The impact of Upstart has on average been considerable on the work trajectories of former Upstarters, and the same is true for their work identities.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

*“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times” - I don’t know how better to sum up my time at [Upstart]. Anyone familiar with the company and its history will know what I’m talking about: it was the flagship of the dot-com bubble in [its home country], or was it the Flying Dutchman, taking those lost at sea to watery grave? Yes, there were casualties, and at times, I felt that I’d be one of them. But I survived, and I learned.”* A former employee in social media

The legacy identity of Upstart can be described as fragmented and conflicted. The conflicts

and fragmentation have been largely driven by the documentary released a few years after the bankruptcy of the firm. The makers of the documentary made a powerful legacy identity claim on Upstart, depicting as a firm characterized by irresponsibility and incompetence. Most former Upstarters disidentify with this legacy identity claim, and consider their work identities threatened by it. The legacy identity claim of the firm is contested by several former Upstarters, and thus competing legacy organizational identity claims are articulated by them. These competing claims are articulated in order to maintain individual work identities, which former Upstarters considered threatened by the legacy organizational identity claim made in the documentary. This has a number of implications.

The literature on collective memory brings some additional understanding on legacy organizational identities, and in particular the notion of memory work. While it is at the very least safe to say that a legacy organizational identity has endured over time in some form at least, it has at the same time fragmented and taken a life of its own, and thus there are a few adjustments I would like to suggest to the conceptualizations of Walsh & Glynn (2008). Contrary to what the authors suggest, legacy organizational identity changes may be determined by outside audiences as well, emphasizing the relational aspects of the construct, just like identities of existing organizations (Alvesson et al., 2008). On the one hand, this is evidenced in the influence of the documentary on the legacy identity of Upstart. This influence was from the outside even if former firm insiders were involved as well. More importantly, it determined the notion that outsiders developed on Upstart's legacy identity. On the other hand, several interviewees reported changed attitudes towards them over time when Upstart was brought up in personal interactions: from suspicious reactions near the time of the release to humorous and even admiring reactions as time had passed and a new IT start-up boom had arrived. Looking at the literature on collective memory, these developments are not surprising. First of all, as several authors (Ricoeur, 2004; Schudson, 1991) have posited, memories of the past are actively and purposely influenced by different actors in society, also when business organizations are considered (Anteby & Molnar, 2012). This is conducted particularly through memory work, which may involve the obfuscation or deliberate reconfiguration (Mena et al., 2015), or interrogation (Kuhn, 2010) of pasts in order to serve present needs. In this case memory work was manifested in the documentary especially. Similarly, collective memory is not only dictated by outside interests, but also by the changing cultural norms of the communities or societies that hold (Brockmeier, 2002; Myszal, 2003). Thus, the fact that Upstart's legacy identity seems to have taken a new meaning among those who remember it would suggest the values and norms of the community (IT professionals) have changed. Understood as a product of processes of collective memory, legacy identities of dead organizations are not unlikely to undergo changes initiated from the outside, and I also

suggest they tend to continue changing as a result of the changing society around them.

As a second point, Gerstroem's (2015) observation that some legacy organizational identity claims may remain stronger, while other may still exist in weaker forms is elaborated here. Not only do weaker claims remain, but organizational legacy identities may even more or less permanently fragment. In this case, an unresolved identity struggle (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) for the legacy of Upstart ensued after the release and propagation of the documentary. It is possible that identity struggles, if they ensue, are more unlikely to be resolved for legacies of dead organizations than for current ones, as they lack a central organization or figures who would work for the resolution of such struggles. Some authors suggest unresolved past events such as this leave lingering contested memories between mnemonic communities in this manner (Fine, 2001; Mena et al., 2015), which is consistent with this idea. Emotional distress of such prolonged contestation is to an extent witnessed in the research interviewees of former Upstarters; however, more material consequences are left to speculation, as are the consequences for their later organizations.

Third, legacy organizational identities in general, but also memory work on legacy organizational identities, have significant consequences for the work identities of the former members of those organizations. The fragmentation of Upstart's legacy identity was at least partly a result of Upstarters' disidentification (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994) with the legacy identity claim made in the documentary. To possess such a legacy identity of Upstart, of irresponsibility and incompetence, posed a threat to the work identities of several former Upstarters. The alternative legacy identity claims discussed above were required in order to maintain the work identities of individual former Upstarters. Despite or because of the documentary, many former Upstarters have retained aspects of Upstart at the core of their work identities, and some have even extended them into the identities of the organizations they have themselves established. Others, in turn, lament the absence of some aspects of Upstart's legacy identity in their present organizations. Several interviewees also described their work identities by polarizing them with the legacy identity claims made in the documentary. What these have in common is that the work identities of most Upstarters are still deeply influenced by the legacy identity of Upstart. The case of Upstart demonstrates that legacy identities of dead organizations may threaten the work identities of their former employees, but one can surmise there can be other types of effects too, including beneficial ones. The influence of legacy organizational identities on individual work identities is particularly important because work identities are significant drivers of action in organizations (Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007), and as such legacy identities of former, dead organizations of employees may influence proceedings in their current work places.

### ***Implications for research***

There are some implications for future research. One such implication concerns learning from such mistakes, and what identity has to do with it. As one former Upstarter bleakly notes in the documentary:

*"Generations will change, and they will do the same silly things again. Including all the side effects surrounding [Upstart], the use of narcotics, well, paid women and everything."* A former Upstarter interviewed in the documentary

Sadly, generally organizations are indeed rather poor at learning from their past mistakes (Brunsson, 1989; Cannon & Edmondson, 2005), which likely has a fair bit to do with memory (Spender, 1996; De Holan & Phillips, 2004). But as witnessed in some of the quotes by former Upstarters, some members of failed organizations at the very least, and by implication, (former) members of organizations that committed mistakes or wrongdoing, may take something with them from these failures, which they then apply in their future organizations. In this study, there is some evidence that it is partly through (or against) legacy organizational identity claims that these former members define either their work identities or new organizational identities. Further investigations into the connection between identity evolution and transfer after corporate irresponsibilities and organizational learning would be needed in order to better understand the mechanisms which govern either learning from past mistakes or failure to do so.

Seeing how group and organizational identities are important resources in the formation of the personal self (Alvesson et al., 2008), the implications of irresponsibility-incurred bankruptcies (or at the very least the portrayals of bankruptcies as such) to the former employees of such dead organizations are an important matter of consideration. As we have seen here, the trauma that some carry after a bankruptcy that has been publicly declared as scandalous can be severe, and has impact on their personal identities, sometimes in the professional sense, other times even outside of the professional sphere. My analysis here suggests that such consequences may be of varying quality; some feel disempowered having been sucked into such events, while others cite personal and professional growth, and important lessons learned. Others still trudge on with few (admitted) concerns over such past events. Why do some adopt a work identity of bristling confidence after such an event, while others almost seem to lose their sense of work identity altogether? What sorts of mechanisms are at work here? An in-depth individual-level investigation into such processes would seem to be in order.

### ***Implications for practitioners***

As an implication of the results of this study, practitioners might do well to pay closer attention to possible bankruptcies in the work histories of their (prospective) employees. Depending on the circumstances in which a former employer went bankrupt, even in cases of scandals or irresponsibility, the employee might bring either useful or harmful elements of the identity of the former organization with him or her. As another implication, organizations should be on their guard against external attempts at influencing their identities, as it may inflict painful identity struggles within the organizations themselves as well as around them.

### ***Limitations***

One limitation in this particular case is the particularly young average age of the former employees of Upstart. At the time, the position at the firm was the first real job for many employees – indeed, the youngest developer was only 17 when he started. As early-career events tend to have an especially high influence on development of work identities, and as memories of events and sequences at the beginning of adulthood have a tendency of being particularly strong, it can be inferred that many of the interviewees in this case have been more highly influenced by Upstart than in many other cases of irresponsibility, bankruptcy, forgetting work, or identity evolution. However, at the same time these specific features of the case make the illuminating extreme case that it is.

Another possible limitation is that as Upstart's existence was rather short and tumultuous with quite a bit of employee turnover, it is to be expected that competing identity claims existed already during the existence of the firm, and one might doubt whether the firm had a strong organizational identity in the first place. Regardless of possible identity conflicts during the firm's existence, it is evident that such conflicts increased after the release of the documentary, which many former Upstarters now consider an anchor with which their identity claims are juxtaposed. Furthermore, despite the organization's young age, the narratives of former Upstarters would suggest that the firm had a fairly strong identity with which many identified, as the parties that were reputedly drew in many employees, they had Upstart-themed apparel manufactured, which are still worn today by some, and many still consider the time spent at Upstart a very positive experience despite all the post-bankruptcy conflicts.

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We seem to be living in a world of constant, recurring corporate scandals; fraud, disaster, death are all common frontpage items nowadays. Yet the attention many of these events receive peters out after a few meager months. Some cases, however, linger and continue to remind us our pasts. In this dissertation my aim is to provide understanding on why and how we collectively forget and remember instances of (purported) irresponsibility. Throughout the course of four individual essays, I demonstrate how groups and organizations purposely influence our understandings of the past, leading to forgetting, remembering, or reconfiguring of our collective memories regarding instances of corporate irresponsibility.



ISBN 978-952-60-6908-1 (printed)  
ISBN 978-952-60-6909-8 (pdf)  
ISSN-L 1799-4934  
ISSN 1799-4934 (printed)  
ISSN 1799-4942 (pdf)

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