Your speech has the best effect, if your life matches the lessons you preach. [Author’s translation] (Holberg, 1971, p. 393)

The above quote stems from a moral fable written by the seventeenth-century essayist and playwright Ludvig Holberg (1971). In this particular fable, the Stork and the Hawk compete to present the most profound speech on moral matters. While both birds speak very eloquently, the judges finally award the prize to the Stork. The reason is that a moral speech given by an innocent Stork is better than a moral speech presented by a bird of prey. In other words, a solid reputation can be an asset for rhetoric and can help the goals of a rhetor. In this chapter, the converse relationship is explored—the ways in which rhetoric can be an asset for reputation are discussed. The chapter focuses particularly on the rhetorical concepts of ethos and identification, and on techniques used to strengthen ethos and create identification. Ethos and identification can improve the understanding of how corporations attempt to manage their reputation.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, a brief discussion of the notion of corporate
reputation is needed and a call for attention to the role of language is issued. Second, a short overview of the Western rhetorical tradition is presented. Third, the ways in which rhetoric can be used to study corporate discourse are discussed. Fourth, the concept of ethos is explained and linked to corporate rhetoric. Fifth, a discussion of the concept of identification is presented, as it has been suggested that the act of creating identification is the key activity of rhetoric. The final part of the chapter presents some ideas for a research agenda on rhetoric and corporate reputation.

Identity, Image, and Reputation

Corporate reputation can be briefly defined as the general estimation the public has of a corporation (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). A premise for the following discussion is that reputation has to be seen in relation to the dialectic pair organizational and corporate identity, as well as in relation to image. In order for corporations to improve their reputation, a first step is for managers to ask “who or what are we as a corporation?” or “who or what do we say we are as a corporation?” Organizational identity can be described as an internally oriented concept that focuses on what the members of an organization think the organization is about. Corporate identity, on the other hand, is influenced primarily by the management’s articulation of the vision and mission of the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Ihlen, 2010a). The Coca Cola Company, for instance, presents its mission in the following way: “To refresh the world … To inspire moments of optimism and happiness … To create value and make a difference” (http://www.thecoca-colacompany.com/ourcompany/mission_vision_values.html, accessed July 7, 2011). Whether or not Coca Cola employees hold a similar view of what the company is about is an empirical question. One hypothesis could be that they see the company as primarily providing a sought-after soft drink.

The identity of an organization can be contrasted with its image, which can be defined as the immediate impression that stakeholders form of the organization. The Coca Cola Company,
for instance, attracted criticism when it became known that it had given the American Academy of Family Physicians a grant to “enhance educational information about nutrition” and “focus on the role of beverages and sweeteners in a healthy diet” (http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/booster_shots/2009/10/american-academy-family-physicians-coca-cola-.html, accessed July 7, 2011). Calling attention to this alliance could create an image of the Coca Cola Company as a corporation trying to prevent physicians from criticizing its product. The image, in turn, forms the reputation, which is seen as the long-term collective judgments observers form of an organization based on their assessments of the financial, social, and/or environmental impacts of the corporation (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006). The reputation of the Coca Cola Company is created not only by the alliance with the American Academy of Family Physicians, but also by its history as a brand positioned in more than 200 countries. A whole section on the Wikipedia website is dedicated to criticism of the company (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Coca-Cola, accessed July 7, 2011).

Stakeholders have first- and second-hand experience with the goods or services of the organization, which also influence the reputation of a corporation (Ihlen, 2010a). First-hand experience would include drinking Coke, living near a Coke plant, being exposed to Coke advertising, and/or doing business with the company. Second-hand experience would for instance be what your friends and relatives tell you about the same matters.

As pointed out elsewhere in this volume, reputation is considered an asset for corporations. Although demonstrating the economic value of a strong reputation has proved to be difficult, most of the literature has indicated how a strong reputation can help to increase sales, attract investors, increase the ability to hold on to and recruit employees, and gain favorable media coverage, and that it helps organizations during crises (e.g., Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; van Riel & Balmer, 1997). Others have argued that both image and reputation reside in the minds
of the stakeholders, making the *management* of image and reputation problematic. Thus, theorists argue that corporations should focus on their identity, which they *can* control through the way they present themselves. A consistent and pleasing corporate identity leads to a positive image, and this, in turn, is thought to create a positive reputation (Campbell, Herman, & Noble, 2006; Ihlen, 2010a).

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that there is no simple relation between corporate identity and corporate image, as both are social constructs. This also means that the concepts should be judged on how well they work rhetorically and not only on their fit with “actual reality” (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001; Christensen & Cheney, 2000). The latter phrase is emphasized to call attention to the difficulty of social mediation of both material and immaterial structures, as will be discussed in the next section. Rhetors always make selections, or as Burke believed: “Even if a given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (Burke, 1966, p. 45).

Social constructionism places language in the central role as our vehicle for understanding the world, and notions such as identity are seen as being constantly negotiated and changed in a social context (Tsetsura, 2010). From this perspective, language becomes not just a communication tool but a way of seeing and generating knowledge. Constructionism also sees the discipline of rhetoric take center stage, as witnessed by the interest from scholars working in such areas as communication, public relations, organizational communication, management, law, political science, history, anthropology, and other areas (Ihlen, 2010b; Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008). Before discussing how rhetoric can be used for the analysis of corporate reputation, however, a brief overview of the Western rhetorical tradition and its epistemology is necessary to give some background understanding.
The Western Rhetorical Tradition and its Epistemology

This section firstly defines rhetoric and points to some of the crucial contributions from the Western tradition. Secondly, it highlights the epistemological perspective mentioned briefly in the preceding section.

The Western rhetorical tradition has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome and in works by such scholars as Aristotle, Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian. Aristotle defined rhetoric as “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, trans. 2007, 1.2.1). For Isocrates, the epistemic quality of rhetoric was important, as he stated that “we use the same arguments by which we persuade others in our own deliberations” (Isocrates, trans. 2000, 15.256).

In everyday use, rhetoric is often applied as a contrast to “substantial action” and “reality.” The term is reserved for empty words and deception. A blog looking at climate science, for instance, juxtaposes what the natural gas industry says with “extensive evidence showing their claims are pure rhetoric, and not reality” (http://www.desmogblog.com/natural-gas-industry-rhetoric-versus-reality, accessed July 7, 2011). In other words, what is implied is that it is only the natural gas industry that engages in rhetoric, whereas its critics rely on facts and information that is imparted straightforwardly. Incidentally, while I sympathize with the cause of this particular blog post, I would maintain that rhetoric involves attempts to persuade and/or convince people, which is something that everyone engages in every day. Everyone uses rhetoric, not least the anti-rhetoricians.

In the twentieth century, a renewed interest in rhetoric was expressed by leading figures such as Burke (1950/1969) and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969/1971). Burke’s goal was to rediscover and restore rhetorical elements that he felt had been obscured and even vandalized by the emphasis on aesthetics. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca shared these sentiments and were
particularly interested in reinstating matters of rationality. The new rhetoricians expanded the scope of rhetoric to include all forms of symbol use, including mass media use.

The new rhetoric was partly driven by epistemological debates, and rhetoric was seen as something more than intellectual history. The basic philosophical underpinnings of the rhetorical tradition were discussed: rhetoric is involved in all human behavior and helps some ideas to be accepted and others to be rejected.

Some have argued that classical rhetoric typically saw truth as something that the rhetor had arrived at previously, and that rhetoric should merely help to communicate this truth (Lunsford & Ede, 1994; Ohmann, 1994). A clearly defined relationship existed between the rhetor, the audience, and the world, which was mediated by language. In modern rhetoric, however, there is no fully confident or generally accepted epistemological stance that articulates the relationship of the knower and the known (Lunsford & Ede, 1994; Ohmann, 1994). Nevertheless, one widespread position is that truth is inseparable from discourse, that is, it is inseparable from the way we use language and interact. Rhetoric is not seen as something that decorates or disguises truth; rhetoric is a way of creating truth as all truths rest upon some kind of human consensus (Farrell, 1999; Scott, 1999). At one point in time, “everyone” knew that the world was flat.

In 1967, taking his lead from Stephen E. Toulmin (1958), Robert L. Scott (1967) argued that rhetoric is epistemic; it is a way of knowing. This social–epistemic rhetoric understands rhetoric as constructing and modifying reality, social conditions, and relationships. Rhetoric is implicated in all human behavior and constructs social knowledge that is situated materially and historically. It is through rhetoric that ideas are accepted or rejected. Rhetorical interaction is involved when something is declared to be a fact, in the interpretation of that fact as well as in how it is used to justify action. This also extends to discourse communities that often try to deny
that rhetoric plays a role—for instance, economics and branches of science dealing with “objective facts” (McCloskey, 1998). Nevertheless, all types of knowledge must rest upon some kind of human consensus, and thus there is a need for rhetoric (Farrell, 1999; Scott, 1999).

In a sense, then, truth might be conceived as being created moment by moment. This has brought about a renewed interest in the works of the sophistic tradition and its emphasis on contingency—how something is probable, rather than certain (e.g., Jarratt, 1991; Poulakos, 1999). Scott later regretted the use of the word “epistemic,” since he saw no way of being certain. According to Scott, rhetoric is a way of knowing, or rather understanding, not the way of knowing or understanding. Most importantly, however, positivism’s notion of grand truths should be ignored (Scott, 1993).

Different labels have been used for the various versions of the epistemological stance sketched above: intersubjectivity, rhetorical subjectivism, rhetorical relativism, and so forth. These stances can be shown to have a modern counterpart, which is alternatively called rhetorical objectivism, rhetorical dialectic, or critical rationalism. The general view held by scholars operating with such mindsets is that truth is discovered with the help of rhetoric. This debate has clear parallels with the sociological debate between realists and constructionists (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the realm of environmental sociology, for instance, realists think that objective knowledge about the environment is possible. In the radical version of social constructionism, however, there is no way of concluding that environmental problems actually do exist (Hannigan, 1995). Some have sought to bridge the problematic duality by placing the two positions on a continuum, and by introducing different mixtures of the two positions (Cherwitz & Hikins, 1999).

Taking the latter course, mixing the two positions, it is possible to argue for the view that “reality” is the product of a synthesis between material structures and practices on the one side,
and the use of symbols that reinforce or question those structures and practices on the other (Sandmann, 1996). The position taken in this essay inclines towards such a synthesis view. It rejects the most radical version of the “rhetoric is epistemic” stance, as that seems to leave little room for material existence. This leads to discussions of ontological matters, that is, thoughts of what exists—kinds of being and the relationship between them. While acknowledging the existence of material structures, this essay argues that rhetoric is necessary for the social mediation of this knowledge. It is not possible to communicate without rhetoric, and rhetoric is crucial for human understanding. In this sense, rhetoric is epistemic, and referring back to Isocrates (trans. 2000), it seems most fruitful to comprehend it as having a dialectic relationship with the ontological. This epistemological position also has importance for the discussion of corporate rhetoric; however, the next section will also examine how the individual-oriented rhetorical theory discussed above can be moved into the sphere of a collective like a corporation.

**Rhetoric and the Corporation**

This section discusses some of the differences between the situation of the ancient, individual orator and the corporation as a modern day rhetor. The direct transfer of ancient rhetorical theory to the study of corporate discourse might be awkward, particularly in light of how an organization is a collectivity with many selves and many realities (Cheney, 1992; McMillian, 2007). Rhetorical theory has always been primarily geared towards individuals, exemplified through, for instance, how Quintilian (trans. 1920/1996) used Cato the Elder’s maxim that an orator was a good man speaking well. Isocrates (trans. 2000, trans. 2004) maintained that only a good man could truly succeed with rhetoric. Roman scholars like Cicero (trans. 2001) and Quintilian (trans. 1920/1996) also spoke about the ideal rhetor as having certain qualities. The latter argued that the orator should possess “genuine wisdom and excellence of character” (Quintilian, trans. 1920/1996, 3.8.13). Taking his lead from this work, Heath (2001)
proposed an ethical and pragmatic ideal for public relations as being “the good organization communicating well” (p. 39).

Elsewhere (Ihlen, 2010b), I have pointed out a number of particular differences between ancient and modern rhetoric. First of all, the rhetors of today mostly represent organizations, and as such they are inseparable from these entities (Crable, 1990). Representing a collective can prove to be an asset as well as a liability for both the individual and the organization. In times of crisis, individuals can be scapegoated in order to diffuse or deny crisis responsibility (Burke, 1945/1969; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). Conversely, the individual can be absolved if the organization takes the blame for the crisis. An individual rhetor representing an organization will also be able to draw on the history and credibility of the organization. A serious corporation could be expected to appoint a competent spokesperson. An example of the reverse would be corporations hiring, for instance, well-known journalists or politicians to be their figureheads or public relations directors. The credibility of the individual can then be transferred to the perhaps less well-known organization.

Second, there is a need for a revamped rhetorical theory, as the new rhetoric encourages the study of all forms of media, forms that the modern organization certainly has at its disposal. Examples range from television appearances, streaming video, press releases, and Twitter messages to buildings and uniforms. A modern rhetoric must be adapted to reflect the understanding that the object of study includes “text” in this broad sense.

A third distinction is that a modern rhetoric has to account for the fact that the time and place of the rhetorical encounter may be very different from the classical setting where a rhetor stood in front of an audience. The audience may be dispersed in time and place, thus making immediate reaction and adaptation difficult or impossible for the rhetor. Furthermore, the mass audience is often more diverse, with differing values and multiple organizational identifications
(Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004; Crable, 1990). A strategy that is appropriate for one group of stakeholders can easily alienate another (Ice, 1991).

Rhetors are also agencies for organizations. They have become actors in the Hollywood sense: the “words we hear are someone else’s: the understanding or emotions generated are controlled by forces off-stage. The actor in the Hollywood sense ‘appears’ and the actor in Burke’s sense remains behind the scenes, not a part of the scene” (Crable, 1990, p. 123).

Finally, much of the identity and reputation literature seemingly urges corporations to ignore their collectivist basis and speak with one voice. Consistency is often presented as a goal in itself, while the value of having multiple identities has been ignored (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001; Christensen & Cheney, 2000; Leitch & Motion, 1999). People often hold multiple and contradictory images of an organization (Boulding, 1956), but they are not necessarily uncomfortable with this situation. Therefore, some scholars have attempted to reconcile the concepts of consistency and multiplicity (van Riel, 1992; van Riel & Balmer, 1997). The theory of common starting points has been suggested, arguing that the starting point should be the central values that an organization uses, but that it is not necessary to make all communication from the organization uniform (van Riel, 1992; van Riel & Balmer, 1997). Importantly, clarity and consistency are not goals that should override the multiplicity of identities, diversity, and voices in organizations (Ihlen, 2010a).

While huge discrepancies between what is said and what is done might hurt the reputation of a corporation, it should be emphasized that aspirational talk does have a legitimate role and may help bring about social change in organizations. Rhetoric also alerts us to the fact that communication and action are interrelated and co-construct one another: “talk is action and, as a result, the power of discourse to constitute organizing practices should not be understated” (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011, p. 565). In other words, corporate rhetoric is not just rhetoric.
The Concept of Ethos

This section discusses the concept of ethos and ethos strategies at some length, before making the explicit connection to corporate rhetoric. Ethos is of particular importance when discussing reputation. First, however, it needs to be mentioned that classical rhetoric emphasized how the rhetor can use three types of proof for the purpose of persuasion: *logos*, or logical arguments, either through inductive reasoning, such as the use of examples, or through deductive reasoning, using premises that lead to certain conclusions; *pathos*, or emotional appeals to the audience; and finally, *ethos*, or ethical appeals that strengthen the credibility of the rhetor. These types of proof are linked to the message, the audience, and the rhetor, respectively. In a given discourse, “these are at all times coordinate and interact mutually, distinguishable but not separable from one another, although one may occasionally take precedence over the others” (Conley, 1990/1994, p. 15).

Ethos is of particular importance when discussing reputation. Aristotle argued that ethos—or character—is “almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion” (Aristotle, trans. 2007, 1.2.4). Since rhetoric deals with areas where no exact knowledge exists, the character of the speaker becomes all-important. Ethos can thus be shown to trump logos, as we do not automatically adhere to valid logical arguments, but we have no choice other than to trust or not to trust the rhetor (Jasinski, 2001).

Following Aristotle, ethos is “character as it emerges in language” (Baumlin, 2001, p. 263). In other words, it is considered as the elements of a speech or a text that present the rhetor as trustworthy. In addition to direct ethos, there is an indirect route through other aspects of discourse (Kinneavy & Warshauer, 1994). Emotional appeal might strengthen ethos as “the hearer suffers along with the pathetic speaker, even if what he says amounts to nothing” (Aristotle, trans. 2007, 3.7.5). Similarly, using enthymemes and maxims—certain logical
appeals—can work well because audiences “are pleased if someone in a general observation hits upon opinions that they themselves have about a particular instance” (Aristotle, trans. 2007.21.15).

While Aristotle argued that invented ethos was the province of rhetoric, other ancient scholars, like Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian, pointed to the importance of the rhetor’s reputation prior to the speech: “The character, the customs, the deeds, and the life, both of those who do the pleading and of those on whose behalf they plead, make a very important contribution to winning the case” (Cicero, trans. 2001, 2.182). Ethos permeates utterances, or as Quintilian put it, “whatever relates to the pleader of the cause relates to the cause itself” (Quintilian, trans. 1920/1996, 4.1.12).

For Aristotle, however, it was important that rhetors did not rely on their reputation alone, as ethos is put into play in each rhetorical situation (Aristotle, trans. 2007, 1.2.4). Aristotle argued that the rhetor should possess qualities that the community defines as virtues. Some thus argue that the rhetor is triggering the “audience’s projection of authority and trustworthiness onto the speaker” (Baumlin & Baumlin, 1994, p. 99). In line with this, Smith (2004) argued that ethos “dwells in the character of the audience; and ... in the speaker’s style” (p. 3). Smith urged us to see ethos as tied not only to the rhetor but also to the text and to the audience of the rhetorical situation.

Aristotle argued that a rhetor could strengthen ethos in three ways:

There are three reasons why speakers themselves are persuasive; for there are three things we trust other than logical demonstration. These are practical wisdom [*phronesis*] and virtue [*arete*] and good will [*eunoia*]; for speakers make mistakes in what they say through [failure to exhibit] either all or one of these. (Aristotle, trans. 2007, 2.1.5)
Practical wisdom, virtue, and good will have a complex interrelation and correspond to the theme, the speaker, and the audience, respectively. In more detail, practical wisdom is understood as knowledge of the right action, something “that is distinct from technical knowledge and that cannot be learned in the same way as technical knowledge” (Kinneavy & Warshauer, 1994, p. 179). Phronesis is also bolstered by the use of logos and stylistic appeals. The latter entails, for instance, a choice of grammatical person, verb tense, and voice.

Attempts to demonstrate virtue—justice, courage, self-control, liberality, magnanimity, magnificence, prudence—can include citing approval from respected authorities (Cicero, trans. 2001). This “third-party technique” is a well-known reputation-building technique today and was also extolled by Aristotle: “Since there are sometimes things to be said about oneself that are invidious or prolix or contradictory … it is best to attribute them to another person” (Aristotle, trans. 2007, 3.17.16). The virtues were seen as “moving targets established by the audience” (Smith, 2004, p. 7). This again points to how the rhetor has to adapt to the audience; virtues valued by one audience might be despised by another. In general, however, the virtues most appreciated by the audience are often those that are most useful to society (Kinneavy & Warshauer, 1994).

Exhibiting goodwill should be understood as wishing good for others for their own sake. As Aristotle writes in The Nicomachean Ethics, “Goodwill is inoperative friendship, which when it continues and reaches the point of intimacy may become friendship proper—not the sort of friendship whose motive is utility or pleasure, for these do not arouse goodwill” (Aristotle, trans. 1996, 9.5.3). If the audience detects a friendship that requires reciprocation, the credibility of the rhetor is not enhanced (Smith, 2004). To demonstrate goodwill, the rhetor should “somehow identify with the audience, by for instance holding some of their basic aspirations, speaking their
language, and if necessary sharing and affirming their prejudices” (Kinneavy & Warshauer, 1994, p. 177). Goodwill might thus be indirectly supported by pathos.

“These are the only possibilities,” Aristotle added after pointing out the three strategies for strengthening ethos (2.1.6). In today’s society, however, we know that character and credibility are also closely tied to what is perceived to be authentic, real, and genuine (e.g., Johansen, 2002). The rhetor has to be perceived as being him- or herself. The rhetor should avoid coming across as scripted or strategic; he or she should appear intimate and sharing, but also appear to be a consistent and consequent actor (Kjeldsen, 2004). Research on rhetoric as well as persuasion has also highlighted other credibility factors: scholars have indicated the importance of power (the audience perceiving that the rhetor might reward or punish them), idealism (the audience members seeing qualities in the rhetor to which they aspire), and similarity (the audience members seeing the rhetor as resembling themselves) (Hart & Daughton, 2005).

Several of the insights presented above can be adapted to the study of corporate rhetoric. The notion of ethos has also been used to analyze corporate environmental rhetoric. Ihlen (2009) argued that corporations rely on a set of archetypical ethos strategies to appear environmentally friendly: first of all, corporations tend to argue that they make the world better with their product or the positive leadership that they offer; secondly, corporations point to how they have cleaned up their own house by actions such as recycling or curbing emissions; thirdly, corporations use the third-party strategy, citing authorities or NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that approve of their environmental efforts; and, finally, corporations argue that they care about their stakeholders and share their interests (Ihlen, 2009).

Corporate rhetors could also pay attention to how the roots of ethos can be traced back to *ethea*, which means “haunts,” and thus that ethos is formed in the places where one “hangs out” (Jarratt & Reynolds, 1994, p. 48). McMillian (2007) sees the creation of *mutual dwelling places*
as replacing corporate monologue with dialogue; including all stakeholders, not only a few privileged ones; adding new measures of success, such as human and social capital; “replacing external attribution with corporate accountability and disclosure”; and fundamentally altering and de-centering the corporation’s “self-adoring gaze” (p. 25). The fundamental reorientation advocated by McMillian might in turn also help organizations to obtain a reputation as a “good organization communicating well” (Heath, 2001, p. 31). As always, however, reputation can only be a by-product of a corporation’s work with its identity. One of the paradoxes of corporate reputation is that attempts to strengthen reputation often fail when they become the goal itself.

The attempt to come across as credible, however, is a more feasible task. Still, ethos is situation-bound; it deals specifically with the judgment of a rhetor’s character at a specific time. Ethos is in play in every communication situation, and thus some argue that ethos might be better likened to image and not to the more long-term reputation (Kjeldsen, 2004). Still, in line with the argument that reputation has to be seen in relation to identity and image, ethos remains a crucial concept for the analysis of corporate reputation. The next section suggests another vital notion, that of identification.

**Rhetoric as Identification**

This section first briefly discusses identification as conceptualized by Burke (1950/1969), and then moves on to discuss techniques for creating identification.

Burke claimed the existence of a basic human drive for identification, cooperation, and communication. Everyone wants to identify with someone and something. Burke argued that identification should be understood in terms of substance, as sharing the same substance or being consubstantial. Human identity is formed through different substances, such as, for instance, physical objects, occupations, friends, and attitudes. In this process of identity formation, humans share substance with the person or the object with whom they identify. Men and women also
identify with each other in what is shared as human beings (Burke, 1945/1969, 1950/1969).

Identification becomes essential for the rhetor, because people can only be persuaded if the rhetor can communicate with, for instance, speech, gestures, tone, ideas, and attitudes: in short, if the rhetor can identify his or her ways with those of the audience. In order to achieve this, both the rhetor and his or her audience have to “die” and be “reborn” a little. A rhetor might be able to change the audience’s opinion in one respect, but will only succeed insofar as he or she yields to the audience’s opinions in other respects (Burke, 1937/1984, 1950/1969).

There is, however, a crucial problem: although identification may be achieved, the division is not lifted. Total identification cannot exist; people are still physically separate beings. Instead, there is a situation of being both joined and separate. This is the paradox of substance and the reason that rhetoric is needed according to Burke. The basic situation is characterized by the concepts of congregation and segregation, cooperation and competition. Identification will always suggest a we and a they (Burke, 1950/1969, 1973).

In the context of corporate reputation, it is primarily ways of creating identification that are of interest. Cheney (1983, 1991) argued that organizations “assist” in identification processes with their employees and other stakeholders in order to induce cooperation and/or to reduce the range of decisions to those alternatives that benefit the organization. The organization seeks to promote oneness with its members. While Cheney focuses on internal organizational communication, the three rhetorical techniques he identified for creating identification can also be extended to external corporate rhetoric:

(1) The common ground technique: the corporation emphasizes common ground between itself and its members or stakeholders in terms of sharing values and/or interests, much like the ethos strategy of showing goodwill towards the audience. In this way, the rhetor attempts to create a direct, associative process whereby the rhetor says, in effect, “I am like you” or “I have
the same interests as you.” In an organizational context, the management might rely on an associational process and express concern for individual members or highlight the contributions made by individuals or groups. The organization might point to how “all” share the same interests and values, and want to achieve the same goals. The organization could advocate the benefits of pursuing the same goals, and also seek praise from others. A corporation might underscore values of freedom and democracy, which the public is likely to share (Crable & Vibbert, 1983). A corporation like ExxonMobil uses the common ground technique in the following way: “We will continue to advocate for an integrated set of solutions to today’s major energy challenges … help address climate change risks, and develop all economical energy sources to meet the needs of today and future generations” (ExxonMobil, 2010, p. 1). The implied idea is that we are all in this together. Here there is also a parallel with the idea that corporations need to create mutual dwelling places (McMillian, 2007).

(2) Antithesis: the management of the corporation presents a common enemy, for instance urging employees to unite against hostile takeovers from a foreign company or government bureaucracy. The antithesis technique is thus a strategy of congregation by segregation; it is a disassociative technique that establishes new associations indirectly. The shared perspective of a “threat from outsiders” creates identification between the corporation and its stakeholders. Responding to signals that US tax breaks would be revoked for corporate jets, the National Business Aviation Association responded: “The president is vilifying an entire industry … This is an attempt to score some cheap political points on the back of an industry that employs 1.2 million people” (Lichtblau, 2011, p. A13). In other words, everyone concerned about jobs and a healthy economy should rally behind this cause.

(3) The transcendent we: corporations could also attempt to create identification by explicitly using personal nouns like “we.” The use of this noun takes identification for granted
and works particularly well when it is not questioned. It then can work on a subtle unconscious level. Corporations typically seem to use this technique when addressing global challenges like climate change. Here is an example from Volkswagen: “there is an urgent need to step up our efforts regarding alternative sources of energy” [emphasis added] (Volkswagen AG, 2009, p. 18). As already indicated, the use of personal nouns can also strengthen the two techniques mentioned above: we share the same interests, we need to stand together against the enemy, and so forth.

To foster identification is to induce stakeholders to have the best interests of the organization in mind when they make decisions, to encourage them to think that things are a certain way, and, not least, to make them believe that this is the way the stakeholders want them to be. To create identification can thus be a fundamental way of creating a strong reputation; it moves beyond “just” being held in high esteem, as witnessed by the following that brands like Mac achieve (e.g., http://www.i-love-mac.com/). Still, the ways in which corporations set about creating identification to foster reputation form one of many areas that deserve closer attention from scholars. In the concluding section, I develop some ideas for other research avenues concerning rhetoric and corporate reputation.

**Conclusion and Research Agenda**

In this essay I have discussed the relationship between rhetoric and reputation. I have pointed to how a strong reputation can be an asset for rhetoric, but also to some particular ways in which rhetoric can help strengthen reputation. A rhetorical approach to reputation indicates strategies for appearing credible and for creating identification with the audience, both types of activities that can be said to help foster a strong reputation in the long run by means of enhancing an organization’s image. A main point has also been to emphasize the fundamental epistemological role that rhetoric plays in constructing identity, image, and reputation: in constructing knowledge in general. A rhetorical approach to reputation provides a valuable
epistemological platform alerting us to the crucial role of language in understanding the world. Rhetoric is enacting and creating the environment, and facts are being conditioned by social agreement. In this way rhetoric also has the power to constitute organizational practices. While a case has been made for studying corporate rhetoric, it is, however, also acknowledged that the direct transfer of knowledge from the individually oriented rhetorical theory is problematic in the context of the collective of the corporation.

The concept of ethos has been discussed along with the ways in which corporate rhetors have set out to strengthen ethos. Several of the corporate strategies in this respect can be recognized from the ancient literature, but new techniques have also been introduced, driven by for instance the modern desire to appear authentic. Given the premise that ethos is situation-specific, it has been likened to image, which in turn may influence corporate reputation (Kjeldsen, 2004). An even more profound way of improving corporate reputation is through the route of creating identification between the corporation and its stakeholders. Some of the rhetorical strategies for this endeavor have been discussed and exemplified. The ability to create identification between a corporation and its stakeholders is also expressed in the relationship between some of the more famous brands like Mac or Harley Davidson and their respective customers.

The behavior of a corporation is key for a good reputation, but the corporate communication behavior is very important too, because we often have no first-hand experience with a corporation, and furthermore, opinions are formed in a social context. Reputation, for instance, has been defined as the degree to which stakeholders feel respect, admiration, trust, and good feelings towards a corporation. These attributes have been measured against dimensions such as financial standing, products and services, innovation, management, working conditions, ethics, and corporate social responsibility (see, Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; van Riel & Fombrun,
2007). It would be interesting to see rhetorical studies tied to each of these dimensions. How are corporations trying to create respect, admiration, trust, and good feelings regarding their products and services? The ability to come across as a credible provider is important, but this is obviously only one aspect. Further research could be conducted on how corporations use logos and pathos, the two other types of proof, when they are trying to build a good reputation as measured against these dimensions.

As mentioned, more research is also needed to gain a better grasp of how corporations attempt to create identification and how this relates to reputation. Furthermore, a fully developed rhetoric for corporate reputation would also have to take into account the situational aspect of rhetoric. Building on Cheney et al. (2004), it may be argued that rhetoric can be useful in the study of how reputation is influenced and created when organizations 1) respond to existing rhetorical situations; 2) attempt to anticipate future rhetorical situations; 3) attempt to shape rhetorical situations; and 4) try to shape their own identities.

A premise that has been furthered in this chapter is that reputation building has to start with the corporation taking a good look at itself and asking some crucial questions about the central, lasting, and unique qualities of the corporation (Albert & Whetten, 2004). When the corporation understands its own identity it might stand a better chance of understanding how its image is perceived. Rhetoric might also assist in ascertaining the words and perceptions of the stakeholders, which in turn should have an influence on the identity work and the behavior of the organization. The epistemological perspective offered by rhetoric should also make it easier for corporations to accept that there are many truths, also relating to identity, image, and reputation.
References


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