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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Corporate Reputation From Within

Majken Schultz[1]

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The event that dragged me into the world of reputation was no doubt the first conference on Corporate Reputation, Image, And Competitiveness in New York in 1997. Knowing absolutely nobody beforehand and coming from a scholarly background in organizational culture and identity studies, the conference was a source of inspiration, new ideas, and not least the beginning of new relationships. Although the conference was small and somewhat improvised compared with the later carefully orchestrated International conferences on Corporate Reputation, it foreshadowed the innovativeness, engagement, and challenges that in my experience have characterized the reputation construct and the community dedicated to the study of reputation.

The ***innovativeness*** of the reputation construct emerged from its ability to integrate concepts across disciplinary boundaries, which at the time were treated separately. The reputation construct combined external assessments of what a company is about with what kind of company insiders are seeking to create. While the reputation construct obviously had strong relations with image, brand, and intangible assets, originating from marketing and strategy, it was less obvious to relate concepts, such as culture, identity, and communication, embedded in organization and communication studies, to reputation. But that was exactly what the reputation community set out to do—motivated by a joint curiosity to explore these new conceptual territories. For my own part, it stimulated a deep interest in studying and conceptualizing how relations between culture, identity, and image influence the long-term reputation of organizations, and how that, in turn, connects to corporate branding. Although my starting point was the inner workings of culture and identity, the reputation construct posed new questions to how these inner workings affected and were affected by the various stakeholders relevant to the organization. In addition, the reputation construct avoided the convenience of choosing one concept over the other, but insisted on developing holistic frameworks. In an academic publication system, where scholars are often rewarded for studying narrow topics within a single discipline, the early era of the reputation construct stands out as a rare pursuit of analyzing the complexity between what organizations believe they are about, how they believe others perceive them, and how others perceive and react to them.

The **engagement with practice** has been a second characteristic of the reputation community. Opposed to most scholars studying practices in organizations, the reputation community actively involved practitioners as co-creators of new knowledge. This co-creation evolved in many different directions from exploring how to measure reputation across companies to clarifying the dilemmas of building a platform for reputation management in the corporate struggle for attention and resources. The openness in the discussions between academics and practitioners was unique and served to fuel the reputation community with ideas overcoming the classic academic distinction between rigor and relevance. For my own part, the engagement with practice in the reputation community created two unique experiences in addition to the numerous inspirations from the annual conferences and company events. One was the opportunity to invite a number of companies to join a 2-year research initiative exploring issues of managing companies as corporate brands. Although the initiative was spearheaded by the LEGO

✉ Majken Schultz
ms.ioa@cbs.dk

[1] Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark

Company, the initiative would not have been possible without the active involvement of corporate communication and brand managers from the reputation community.[1] A second activity was the creation of a Reputation Institute Membership Network, comprising between 12 and 15 corporate communication managers from the leading global Danish companies. Lasting for more than 10 years, the network provided bi-annual workshops debating recent insights on reputation as well as novel conceptual developments, such as the temporality of reputation and the role of social media. I was orchestrating these workshops together with a team from The Reputation Institute Denmark and I have reasons to believe that they were very rewarding and inspirational also to the involved practitioners, whose core team remained over the full period.

Of course this development has not been without **challenges**, which is to be expected as you establish new conceptual—and commercial—territories. Although several scholars in the reputation community developed and published holistic frameworks across disciplines (Mary Jo Hatch and myself included), the scholarly community never managed to settle on a shared conceptual framework, which could have enabled a shared research agenda, more robust to the push for mono-disciplinary thinking. The cross-disciplinary ambition was echoed in the wish to engage practitioner from multiple organizational functions, but as in academia, turf-issues among functions influenced the reputation community, which relied on the engagement of corporate communication managers—often more rich in conceptual sophistication than corporate resources (i.e., compared with marketing). Finally, the issue of the gradual commercialization of the Reputation Institute itself posed a number of critical discussions related to the academic access and use of the vast amount of data on reputation collected over the years, as well as the foundations for interacting with practice. While academia is inclusive and non-commercial in its nature, the further development of the reputation community has been limited by its commercialization and partly exclusiveness.

In many ways, the reputation construct is still very much alive and well. We have witnessed the emergence of other academic communities focused on the reputation construct, such as the Oxford Centre for Corporate Reputation. In business, the reputation construct has been adopted by multiple corporate functions from risk management to marketing and corporate communication practices—enhanced by the development of still more sophisticated ways of measuring and tracking reputation. Last, but not least, the fundamental issue of how organizations operate and are perceived in a larger eco-system of stakeholders is more important than ever and holds lot of promise for the future of reputation.

However, the construct also faces challenges going forward. The embracing of the construct in practice implies that the construct is often reduced to the various measurement systems and dashboards used to track reputation. This implies that reputation from being a potentially holistic and multidisciplinary construct is turned into a sophisticated methodology for measuring stakeholder perceptions. Whereas such development may be useful for companies, it holds less promises for its further theoretical and conceptual development of reputation as a core construct. Instead, the reputation construct may blend with other topics making contributions to other conceptual developments without taking center stage. This is illustrated in the program for Academy of Management 2017, where 51 sessions addressed topics including reputation, but only two of the sessions had reputation in the title. Whether this is indicative of the future of the reputation construct will depend on the scholarly motivation to keep renewing the construct.

Majken Schultz (born 1958 Ph.D.) is Professor of Management and Organization Studies at Copenhagen Business School, since 1996. She is an International Research Fellow at the Centre for Corporate Reputation at Oxford University, Saïd Business School and member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters. Her current work explores how organization actors construct their temporality with a special focus on the interplay between different time horizons pointing both backwards and forwards in time. Drawing on culture and identity studies she has published work on corporate branding and corporate reputation. She has published more than 60 articles in leading international journals and co-written/edited more than a dozen books. Her work has been translated into Spanish, Korean, Portuguise, Turkish, Arabic and Danish. In 2017 Majken has more than 16.000 citations at Google Scholar. She is actively involved in the Danish Business Community in a variety of networks and holds several positions in company boards. See more at www.majkenschultz.com.

[1] The Corporate Brand Initiative was created together with Mary Jo Hatch and many of our discussions and cases were later published in "Taking Brand Initiative: How Companies can Align Strategy, Identity and Culture through Corporate Branding," 2008. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.