The author explores how a tobacco firm in crisis engaged in crisis communication and image repair work in a highly polarized ideological milieu. Through an analysis of the tobacco firm’s public statements produced in the aftermath of a 1997 lawsuit, the author demonstrates how the firm dealt with its milieu by exploiting and embracing both of the ambient ideological poles. By embracing these poles, the firm turned critique and opposition into discursive resources for its crisis communication. The author argues that political–ideological framing of organizational communication and discursive appropriation of critique and opposition serve as critical foci for organizational communication scholarship.

Keywords: crisis communication; image repair; tobacco industry; discourse

Legitimacy and corporate reputation are two of the many resources an organization needs for its long-term survival (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1994; Suchman, 1995). As famously suggested by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), “Organizations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (p. 150; cf. Grewal & Dharwadkar, 2002). Organizational legitimacy refers here to the congruence between the operations of a firm and societal values and expectations (Davidson, 1996; Suchman, 1995). Organizations that diverge from the surrounding expectations and values are likely to incur serious social disapproval that can jeopardize the survival strength of the organization through

Author’s Note: I am grateful for the comments that I received from Pushkala Prasad on ideas both directly and indirectly related to this article. I also thank the Management Communication Quarterly editor James Barker and the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.
bad reputation and damaging publicity (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Knight & Greenberg, 2002).

An organization’s legitimacy is often jeopardized when it faces a crisis (Seeger, 1987). The literature on crisis and organizational legitimacy and corporate reputation is both vast and varied and includes studies of different strategies for image repair and restoration (Benoit, 1995, 1997, 2006; Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004), rhetoric and symbolism of crisis management (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Johnson & Sellnow, 1995; Sellnow, 1993; Ulmer, 2001), and crisis communication (Coombs, 2000, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2006).

Crises do not appear in a social vacuum but should be understood as social phenomena, represented, defined, and experienced in certain social and cultural situations. Previous research on image repair and crisis communication has investigated the situational character of crises in various ways. In organizational communication literature, the specific situation framing the crisis communication and image repair has been discussed in terms of different audiences and stakeholders to which crisis responses should be adapted (Benoit, 1997, 2006; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003; Stephens, Malone, & Bailey, 2005; Ulmer, 2001; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000), different types of crises requiring different communicative strategies (Coombs, 1995, 1999, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2002), and different cultures and systems of values (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003; Tyler, 1997).

However, we find a specific crisis situation largely neglected in the empirical research on crisis communication: the ideological context in which organizations operate. Scholars can depict organizational legitimacy and reputation as the outcomes of the relation between organizations’ deeds, proclaimed values, and norms and the ideological and normative environment in which the organization undertakes its business. Paying attention to the complex and often heterogeneous ideological surroundings in which organizations’ communicative endeavors take place is crucial for understanding organizational communication as a political practice. From this standpoint, organizational communication is embedded in a network of power relations and engaged in specific struggles over power and legitimacy. The network of power relations offers both resistance and support. The present article thus addresses the following research question: How do organizations engage in crisis communication in a heterogeneous and polarized ideological milieu to regain threatened or lost legitimacy?
The present research is a case study of the Swedish tobacco firm Swedish Match’s attempts to handle a major crisis, perhaps the largest crisis in the history of the organization. In 1997 a lawsuit was filed against Swedish Match by the main antismoking organization in Sweden, A Non Smoking Generation. At the time, the ideological milieu in Sweden was characterized by, on one hand, a prevalent social democratic heritage, emphasizing the collective and strong state, and, on the other, an emergent neoliberal ideological spirit, stressing individual market solutions and free choices. This situation provided a polarized ideological setting that might seem difficult to embrace in one and the same communicative response. The present study provides insight into how the tobacco firm in its crisis communication managed to embrace and even exploit this ideological tension. Acknowledging how organizations’ communicative strategies are embedded in historically and ideologically specific situations can reveal for critical analysis close-up case studies of organizations’ attempts to discursively navigate complex milieus.

In the next section I present a brief overview of how the situational character of crises has been dealt with in previous research on crisis communication. After a discussion of the methodological considerations underpinning the research design, I present the analysis of the tobacco firm’s responses to the lawsuit. The article concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

**Crises as Situational Phenomena**

The most common way of dealing with the situational character of organizational crises and crisis communication is in terms of the various stakeholders and audiences surrounding the organization. A crisis is then understood as situational in that it is interpreted and defined by the organization’s different audiences. Benoit (1997) held that because of the multiple audiences to which an organization communicates, it is crucial to prioritize the most relevant audience in the design of crisis communication strategy. In an empirical study of a press conferences held by U.S. President George Bush in 2004 during a critical phase in the Iraq war, Benoit (2006, p. 141) concluded that, because of his failure to deal with a “polarized audience,” Bush did not succeed in repairing his damaged reputation. In a similar vein, Ulmer (2001) emphasized the importance of a well-developed communication with the organization’s main stakeholders. If organizations can accomplish a positively valued precrisis communication
with these stakeholders, Ulmer held, the chances to be successful in postcrisis communication are greater compared to when precrisis communication has failed.

Another situational feature that has been acknowledged in the literature is the specific type of crisis facing the organization. Coombs (2000) presented five types of crises that demand different crisis response strategies. The five different crisis types, that is, rumors, natural disasters, malevolence, accidents, and misdeeds, can be seen as different definitions of the kind of situation the organization has to deal with in its image repair work and crisis communication. Coombs and Holladay (2002) expanded the list to 13 types of crises: rumor, natural disaster, malevolence or product tampering, workplace violence, challenge, technical breakdown accident, technical breakdown product recall, mega damage, human breakdown accident, human breakdown product recall, organizational misdeeds (without injuries to external stakeholders), management misconduct, and organizational misdeeds (with injuries to external stakeholders). The number of crisis types is less important than what this view has to say about crises and their situational character. A crisis is not only just any crisis. A crisis is something quite specific, defined in a certain way at a certain time, calling for different responses (also see Coombs, 1995). Thus, different types of crises offer different crisis situations.

A third main strand in the literature dealing with the situational framing of crisis communication acknowledges the value environment in which an organization has to respond to crises. Benoit and Brinson’s (1999) study of the image repair work undertaken by Queen Elisabeth in the aftermath of Princess Diana’s death serves as a good example. The authors suggested that not only was the death of Princess Diana a traumatic situation as such, but the royal family also faced a general antiroyal public that created a cumbersome situation for the royal family’s communication with the public. Another example is Seeger and Ulmer’s (2003) study of the Enron crisis in which the authors discussed the importance of what they refer to as “responsible leadership,” which includes the capacity to orient in a complex surrounding of stakeholders and values. The cultural specificity of image repair work is addressed in Drumheller and Benoit’s (2004) study of USS Greeneville’s collision with the Japanese trawler, the Ehime Maru, in 2001, an accident that killed nine people. Mortification was then, Drumheller and Benoit argued, the most appropriate crisis response strategy considering Japanese culture. An interesting contrast to Drumheller and Benoit’s study is Tyler (1997), who discussed the impact of the legal system on crisis communication. Tyler argued that in a legal system (or culture) that has little
room for apologies, remorse and apologies can in effect prove to be more harmful than helpful for an organization in crisis.

The research reviewed above shapes our understanding of crisis communication in specific situations and in relation to specific stakeholders, kinds of crises, and value environments. However, these studies fail to engage how the ideological milieu frames both the public representations of crises and the resulting organizational crisis communication, especially when the ideological surroundings are heterogeneous. Such heterogeneous and complex ideological milieus constitute very specific and challenging situations that seem to reside outside more general thumb rules of image repair and crisis communication. The next section describes how the Swedish Match lawsuit presents such a specific and challenging situation.

The Crisis: The Lawsuit Against Swedish Match

The tobacco industry has for quite some time been one of the most illegitimate and debated industries in Sweden. In 1995, Bo Könberg, member of the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs at the time, made clear that

"tobacco with its negative effects is something that concerns all of us. Tobacco is perhaps the biggest health problem today and the severest risk factor for cardiovascular and other diseases. (Könberg, 1995, p. 107)"

According to Pellmer and Wramner (1997), smoking is one of the most prominent causes of premature death in Sweden, and more than 10,000 persons die every year from smoking-related diseases. Although Lalander (1993, p. 168) set the number of deaths lower at 6,000 people per year, the exact numbers are not really what is most important here. More pertinent for the discussion in this article is the presence of a well-spread and loud public voice claiming a close relationship between tobacco consumption and serious diseases of various kinds.

The lawsuit filed against Swedish Match in 1997 was handled by lawyer Leif Silbersky, a well-known figure in both media and public debates. Silbersky represented 40-year-old Ann Gustafsson who suffered from lung cancer caused by 20 years of cigarette consumption. In the wake of several American lawsuits against the tobacco industry, this action was the first legal matter of its kind in Sweden, and the media followed the process closely.

Silbersky based the lawsuit on the claim that Swedish Match had failed to fulfill its legal obligation to inform the customers about the risks
related to tobacco consumption. According to the lawsuit, the company had consequently distorted and confused the consumers’ perceptions of cigarette smoking. When Gustafsson first began to smoke in 1973, no warning texts appeared at the cigarette packets. Given this lack of information, Silbersky claimed that consumers were not made conscious of the perils of tobacco smoking.

Furthermore, the lawsuit also concerned the marketing and selling of the specific cigarette brand Gul Blend, a cigarette that had been marketed as a “light” tobacco product with a relatively low amount of tar and equipped with an extralong filter tip. Silbersky claimed that when cigarette smokers such as Gustafsson became aware of tobacco consumption risks, the smokers were still misled by Swedish Match because the firm’s “light product,” Gul Blend, was positioned as a less dangerous cigarette. Thus, despite the tobacco company’s knowledge of the remaining risks, Gul Blend was, according to the plaintiff, cynically marketed as a relatively safe tobacco product.

However, scientific research suggested that the so-called light cigarettes could be even more hazardous than regular cigarettes because the smoker had to inhale even deeper and stronger to receive the same amount of nicotine. As a result, the carcinogenic substances in tobacco smoke were drawn much deeper down into the lungs.

The lawsuit was submitted to the Stockholm District Court on the May 30, 1997, but was subsequently dismissed as the court could find no legal grounds for the suit. The plaintiff appealed the decision, but the Court of Appeals found no reason for changing the decision. Silbersky then turned to the Swedish Supreme Court. In May 1998 the Supreme Court decided to admit the case. This was the very first time that the responsibility of the tobacco industry was to be scrutinized by a judicial authority in Sweden. In September 1998, Ann Gustafsson died from lung cancer, and Silbersky then withdrew the entire lawsuit. Even though the suit was eventually withdrawn at Gustafsson’s death, the legal action still presented a serious legitimacy crisis for Swedish Match. Thus, in addition to the monetary costs related to the judicial process, Swedish Match was forced to produce public counterstatements of different forms: press releases, interviews, and shareholder meetings. These public statements constitute the present case study’s empirical data set.

Method

This case described above is characterized by both specificity and boundedness (Stake, 1994, p. 236). Such a serious crisis triggers, in a relatively
specific, concentrated, and bounded (in time and space) form, explicit defense reactions by the firm that are useful for critical analysis. Moreover, as image repair takes place mainly in and through public discourse (broadcast, newspapers, Internet), the firm’s public reactions (in contrast to interview studies or surveys) situate the phenomenon of interest (crisis communication and image repair) in its real context (Yin, 2003).

Data-Gathering Procedures

I collected the public statements made by Swedish Match in reaction to the lawsuit between May 1997 and October 1998. I particularly focused on five sources of data: three CEO speeches delivered at the annual shareholder meetings from 1997 to 1999, five articles in large Swedish newspapers, three television news broadcasts (1996 to 1997), two press releases (1997 to 1998), and the 1997 annual report. I collected transcriptions of the CEO speeches and the press releases from the Swedish Match homepage, and I obtained the television news broadcasts from A Non Smoking Generation’s media archive in Stockholm. This archive provides a collection of everything that has been written, published, and broadcast with respect to the tobacco industry in Sweden in the past decades. After the completion of data collection, I translated all text originally published in Swedish into English.

Analysis of Data

First, I organized the public statements into the temporal sequence in which they appeared in the public debate. The purpose was to reconstruct the conversational order (accusations and responses) of the debate following the lawsuit. In the second phase of the analysis, the material was thematically organized and coded. This part of the analysis was informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). That is, emergent themes were generated from an inductive classification of the temporally ordered material. In a first phase, I singled out individual statements from the lawsuit debate and used them as the primary building blocks (elements) of the analysis. Then I used concept cards to assign individual elements under one descriptive label (cf. Prasad, 1993). The concept cards were continuously reorganized through a process often referred to as constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. vii) until the cards and labels captured the data material with as few labels as possible without losing touch with the complexity of the data. This procedure resulted in seven themes that I subsequently grouped into two overriding themes, the discourse
of collectivism and the discourse of individualism. These two themes emerged as abstractions of the complexity in the public statements. As such, the themes are in a sense ideal in character, cleansed from some of the complexity of the empirical material, and represent analytical ideal types that illustrate two broad tendencies in the empirical material.

The validity of qualitative research requires presenting trustworthy interpretations of the empirical material, and scholars could question my choice not to interview the people involved in the case in question. However, my main interest in this study has not been the intentions or ideas behind the production of public statements but rather the potential effects of these texts in the particular crisis and its ideological setting. This is why no interviews with lawyers or members of Swedish Match have been included in the data corpus.

Findings: Embracing Collectivism and Individualism

Two overriding themes structured Swedish Match’s public image repair in relation to the lawsuit in 1997: a discourse of collectivism and a discourse of individualism. By drawing on both of these partly contradicting discourses, the tobacco firm engaged quite directly with a polarized and fragmented ideological milieu—one hand a pervasive social democratic (collective) heritage and on the other an emergent stream of neoliberal (individualistic) values. This tense ideological milieu provided as well as constrained the set of discursive resources at hand for Swedish Match in its crisis communication.

Swedish Match operated in a country that for long periods had been governed by social democratic governments. Since 1936, the only non-social democratic governments in Sweden were in power from 1976 to 1982 and from 1991 to 1994. Traditionally, collectivism has held a strong position in the social democratic ideological corpus. “Solidarity,” “mutual respect,” and “mutual dependence” were (and still are) notions frequently used in the social democratic discourse in Sweden, not least as a part of the construction of the country’s model of a general welfare state. As formulated in the Social Democracy party platform from 1990,

As societal creatures, people are dependent on each other, for their own welfare too. It is in cooperation, not in struggle, between people that the common welfare and thus the individual welfare can be built. The mutual respect
constituting the core of solidarity is born from the awareness of this. For those struggling from below, solidarity supports in the fight for justice. For everybody, irrespective of strength, solidarity is a prerequisite for the safety and community in society that can be born only from faith, never from struggle and competition. (Socialdemokraterna, 1990)

According to this statement, the strong mass of majority constitutes the ground on which the welfare society is built.

At the time of the lawsuit, however, neoliberal values were in ascendancy in Sweden and Europe in general. According to some commentators, neoliberalism is the most influential ideological movement in the contemporary Western world. The advent and growth of the European common market in addition to the breakdown of the former communist block further increased the commonsense character of neoliberalism and market-based solutions. Although social democratic voices emphasize the collective, shared responsibility, and solidarity, neoliberalism holds as its primary tenets the free individual and more or less untamed market forces. The individual right (as well as responsibility) to choose is here a celebrated idea. According to neoliberal advocates, the evolution and progress of society are contingent on free markets and individual liberty. The individual hence replaces the collective as the premise of political solutions. Neoliberalist proponents present market freedom as the primary salvation from poverty and oppression and as a route, perhaps the route, toward democracy.

Table 1 summarizes the two discursive themes that Swedish Match presented as a response to both the lawsuit and the polarized ideological milieu.
The Discourse of Collectivism

The discourse of collectivism assumed a variety of forms in the public statements, but all of these forms referred to the celebration of a collective voice in society. Four subthemes emerged in the analysis of the data: tobacco as a choice of the community, tobacco as a parliamentary and governmental issue, the virtue of rule following, and the history of state ownership.

Tobacco as a choice of the community. At the annual general meeting at Swedish Match in 1999, the CEO commented on the issue of tobacco and its role in society:

As I see it, the community has three choices with respect to tobacco: a total ban, government ownership and control, or private enterprise. And the community has chosen private enterprise. (Sundén, 1999)

The community’s choice of a private enterprise with respect to the production and marketing of tobacco is here presented as a strong argument in favor of Swedish Match and its business. This argument draws on the notions of “choice” and “the collective” in the very same discursive move. The logic of this account is that “we are here because the community, the people, wants us to be here.” Thus, the active choice has already been made elsewhere, and Swedish Match is therefore not to be blamed for the consequences of the people’s deeds.

In a similar vein, the chief lawyer at Swedish Match gave the following reply to a journalist’s question in an interview in 1998:

Journalist: More people than ever die from tobacco use than from any other death cause. Isn’t it a problem, then, to produce and sell such hazardous products?
Lawyer: Yes, of course, but it is the society that determines whether the risks are acceptable or not. The society has decided that tobacco products are allowed to be sold and marketed freely . . . no, maybe not marketed, but they are allowed to exist, and it is the Swedish Social Welfare Board [Socialstyrelsen] that writes the health information. We are urged specifically not to have any considerations of our own regarding the health risks. (Interview With Bo Aulin, 1998)

A variation of this theme can be found in the references made to a more general “societal support,” which refers here to an abstract collective, a sort of collective attitude in society. The following excerpt from the annual general meeting held in 1998 exemplifies this attitude:
We appreciate the support we have in the Swedish society, which so many of our owners represent, and we believe that, not only Swedish Match, but Swedish society too benefits from that support. (Lindén, 1998a)

Tobacco as a parliamentary and governmental issue. In referring to tobacco as a parliamentary or government issue, the choice of the community is emphasized. That is, instead of alluding to “the community” in an abstract manner, the referent here is to the parliament and government elected by the people. The responsibility is hereby once more allocated outside Swedish Match’s decisional sphere and attributed to the politicians elected by the people. The following extract from the 1999 general meeting demonstrates this point:

Tobacco’s role in society is a political issue, and it is the task of the public authorities to handle this issue. (Sundén, 1999)

The crux of the statement is that not only the tobacco consumers but also the producers are subjugated under the apparatus of representative democracy. Swedish Match thus acts in accordance with the mandate of democracy.

Another interesting illustration is found in the following transcript taken from a discussion in a morning news broadcast on Swedish television Channel 4:

Journalist: Don’t you experience any moral dilemma in being the CEO for Swedish Match, if you are questioned self-critically, that you are selling products that lead to lung cancer?
Bo Aulin, senior vice president, Swedish Match: That is a moral issue, OK. And I think that if you are to work with this, as well as if you want to support or invest in this, then you should ask yourself that question. I think that is a reasonable question to ask. I have nothing against Non Smoking Generation bringing it up.
Journalist: What is your answer to the question then?
Bo Aulin: I don’t have any problems with that, no.
Journalist: You have no problems with the moral issues?
Bo Aulin: No, I don’t for the simple reason that the government and the parliament have decided that our enterprise should be run on business grounds, in free competition with other corporations. That is what we are doing. And we are moreover trying to do what we can to develop our products in order to be able to reduce the health risks associated with smoking. I cannot see how we could conduct our business in a more responsible manner. (Irving, 1996)
In this excerpt, selling tobacco is defended by means of references to the democratic apparatus. When the CEO was pushed by the journalist to discuss his own personal view of the moral tensions involved in tobacco business, Aulin alluded to the decisions made in the Swedish parliament (i.e., that Swedish Match is to be “run on business grounds”).

This standpoint was also presented in a press release distributed by Swedish Match as an immediate response to the Supreme Court’s decision to grant the lawsuit:

It is the Swedish Parliament that has laid down the rules governing the ways in which tobacco products may be marketed and sold. The rules have come about in the full knowledge of the health risks associated with smoking, including the risk of lung cancer. These rules state that the marketing and sale of tobacco products is permitted. (Swedish Match, 1998)

The virtue of rule following. The notion of a collective voice was also drawn on by Swedish Match in the recurrent references to the virtue of abiding by the rules and laws. At the annual general meeting in 1997, the president of Swedish Match stated,

We conduct our business with the support of the law and with respect for the law. (Lindén, 1997)

At the general meeting the following year the president also claimed,

We comply with the applicable laws and rules in all our markets, and we work to ensure that people under the age of 18 can neither buy nor use tobacco. (Lindén, 1998a)

According to this statement, as long as laws are adhered to, tobacco production and marketing are not to be blamed. The law is thereby placed on equal footing with the moral convictions and guidelines of the community. Organizational legitimacy is thus constructed by stressing the importance of keeping within the juridical boundaries. In the Channel 4 morning news, the following discussion took place:

Birgitta Steinwall (chairwoman of A Non Smoking Generation): We know that this is a product that kills. Should one have such a product?
Bo Aulin: No, that is right. Then, you ask yourself that question, “Should one have such a product?” I think you should ask yourself that question. And if you can’t accept it, then you can work for a ban on tobacco. And in that
case, I can promise you that we will wind up that enterprise because we are actually a legal company. But as it is now, we have two million people demanding our products. And someone must actually take care of the existing demand. These are legal products. We conduct our business within the boundaries drawn by the law. (Irving, 1996)

*If* tobacco would face a ban, Mr. Aulin assured the public in the excerpt above, then Swedish Match would close its business.

The *history of state ownership*. The history of state ownership is also a discursive resource stemming from the discourse of the collective. The same day Mr. Silbersky submitted the lawsuit, Swedish Match published the following press release:

Swedish Match’s Response to the Filing of American-Style Lawsuit

The Silbersky American-style lawsuit claiming that Swedish Match failed to warn about the risks associated with smoking is without merit. Bo Aulin, General Counsel and Senior Vice-President of Swedish Match, speaking on behalf of the Company, noted:

“The failure in this case is not Swedish Match’s, but rather Mr. Silbersky’s, in failing to remember that Swedish Match was entirely owned and operated by the Swedish state, and that cigarettes were sold under the direction of the Swedish government during the time period his client claims to have begun smoking and during most of the time she decided to continue smoking.” (Swedish Match, 1997)

Once more, the responsibility is reattributed from the individual company to the state and the government. In a defense article, in 1998, president and CEO Göran Lindén wrote,

We are conducting the tobacco enterprise in accordance with the same principles as did the Swedish government when it owned us as well as formulated the rules for the industry. (Lindén, 1998b)

To conclude this section, the frequent employment of the discourse of collectivism discussed above found its legitimizing potential, and basis for image repair, in the historically anchored social democratic *Zeitgeist* of the 20th century in Sweden. In stressing tobacco business as an enterprise sanctioned by the democratic apparatus, and by means of referring to tobacco in society as first and foremost a parliamentary and governmental
issue, the broad collective becomes the legitimizing force in the argument. I now turn to the second main discourse employed by Swedish Match in its efforts to regain its legitimacy in the aftermath of the lawsuit.

The Discourse of Individualism

Central themes in the discourse of individualism are the notions of individuality and freedom. This discourse was employed by Swedish Match in three different versions: the individual right to make choices, the individual responsibility to choose, and the individual responsibility to know.

The individual right to make choices. At the core of this theme is the right of every individual member of society to come to his or her own decision regarding how to lead his or her life. At the annual general meeting in 1997, the CEO of Swedish Match proclaimed,

One area in which all well-meaning people should be able to cooperate is the smoking among young people, since everybody agrees that anything possible should be done to prevent it. Swedish Match’s position as to this issue is absolutely clear: Under the age of 18, no tobacco! We are prepared to work actively against underage smoking in all of our markets. In cooperation with retail outlets, we have run a program for several years aimed at preventing the sale of tobacco to anyone under the age of 18. We intensified our efforts when Swedish law forbade such business at the beginning of this year. In a broad campaign we did all we could to strengthen the effectiveness of the new law. But as clear as our standpoint is concerning smoking among young people, as determined are we to defend the right of adults to make up their own minds whether or not they want to use tobacco. This is also the viewpoint supported by the Swedish society, through the government and parliament. (Lindén, 1997)

The most intriguing part of this excerpt is the last sentence. After first having subscribed to the condemnation of manufacturing, marketing, and selling tobacco products to underage persons, the CEO made it clear that when the consumers have entered adulthood (i.e., the age of 18 years), new rules become relevant. It is thus assumed here that an adult person has the intellectual capacity to make independent decisions as well as the right to do so.

Individual responsibility to choose. In this theme the emphasis is put not so much on the right to choose as on the individual and moral responsibility
to make individual choices concerning the trajectory of life. An illustration of this aspect is provided by the following extract from an interview with Bo Aulin, the chief lawyer at Swedish Match:

Bo Aulin is a Swedish tobacco lawyer. He is handling the legal matters as well as the information at Swedish Match, the one and only tobacco company in the country. From his room “Havanna” he organizes the information plans. At the moment, an emotionally driven propaganda war against the tobacco industry is taking place, Bo Aulin thinks. He is calm though. He leans himself back in his leather armchair and says, in a triumphant tone, that Swedish Match has already won the process against lawyer Leif Silbersky. The Stockholm District Court did not find any legal grounds for the complaints directed toward the company, from a woman operated on for lung cancer. “Of course, we, just as much as other companies, have a responsibility,” Bo Aulin says and folds his golden framed glasses. “But the company is not responsible for every individual person’s illness.” (Interview With Bo Aulin, 1998)

“The company is not responsible for every individual person’s illness,” the tobacco lawyer declared, and he thereby seemed to indicate that this responsibility belongs to the individual consumer. In an evening news broadcast in 1997, this individual consumer responsibility was referred to in terms of offerings that can be either accepted or rejected by consumers.

Reporter: In tobacco there is a natural proportion between tar and nicotine. That proportion has been altered by Swedish Match by means of retaining the degree of nicotine while lowering the content of tar. But the company denies that this is a matter of manipulation.

Bo Aulin, manager, Swedish Match: Manipulation is sort of . . . there is something conspirational about it. I don’t see a conspiracy in this. We offer the consumers cigarettes with certain characteristics and with a certain taste and we also inform them about the declared measures of content. The consumer himself tastes and assesses whether or not this appeals to him. If he thinks there is too much nicotine in the cigarette, well, then he won’t buy it. (Jansson, 1997)

The consumer is here portrayed as a person who is able to arrive at a well-founded and rational decision regarding his or her tobacco consumption. However, this is not merely a descriptive observation. More important, the observation presents a prescriptive or normative message that it is a moral duty to make one’s own decisions as to potentially dangerous products. If the consumer fails doing so, as the argument here seems to assert, then Swedish Match is not the one to be blamed.
Individual responsibility to know. Related to the theme above are the references made to the obligation to have access to accurate knowledge concerning the consumption of tobacco. This can be seen as a redistribution of responsibility from the tobacco producer to the consumer. Considering the character of the case studied in this article, the informational responsibility is of great significance. Consider, for instance, the following account from an interview with Bo Aulin:

“This woman thinks that she has not been informed of the risks related to smoking, and that she has been mislead by the marketing.”

He becomes silent. Then the tobacco manager clarifies:

“I mean, everybody knows that tobacco products involve health risks. Unless she hasn’t lived all her life in a closet, she should have been aware of this.” (Interview With Bo Aulin, 1998)

Once more, two kinds of redistribution of responsibility should be mentioned here: one descriptive and one normative. The descriptive redistribution (“everybody knows . . .”) is probably the most precarious one from the point of view of Swedish Match, as this is in principle possible to falsify. First, what does “knowing” mean here? Does it involve being aware of rumors and media gossip as to tobacco and health risk, or does it refer to being well informed about the latest tobacco research? Second, specifically regarding the Gustafsson case, was it really the case that “everybody knew” in 1973, the year Ann Gustafsson started to smoke? What was the level of common awareness of the risks associated with tobacco in society at the time being?

The normative redistribution of responsibility (“she should have been aware . . .”) in the excerpt presented above differs from the descriptive one in that it does not assume that everybody knows but rather emphasizes the duty to know. The formulation “she should have known” seems to connote a strong moral statement about individual responsibility to be knowledgeable. In a society that hails information flow and fast-moving media such as Google information search, the appeal of this argument is perhaps not very surprising. When information is described as one of the major building blocks of society, the gathering and processing of information is stressed as an important survival competence.

The supply of information thus becomes a crucial issue. Who is to provide the information needed for individual and free decision making? Swedish Match tried to find a rhetorical solution to the information problem by means of referring to the health warning signs printed on the
tobacco packages. The excerpt below was collected from the annual general meeting in 1998:

Swedish tobacco packaging has carried health warnings since 1977. These health warnings are texts that provide information about the health risks associated with tobacco use. That is a good thing. It is important that every consumer is educated and well informed. (Lindén, 1998a)

Discussion and Implications

I have discussed the heritage of social democracy and the emergence of neoliberalism as two ideological resources and constraining forces in the midst of which the tobacco firm Swedish Match navigated its public crisis communication. By drawing on the discourses of collectivism and individualism, the tobacco firm not only handled but also embraced the ideological tensions characterizing Sweden at the time. These findings have theoretical as well as practical implications.

Theoretical Implications

This study adds to the knowledge of image repair and crisis communication by exploring and illustrating with an in-depth case how an organization in crisis related not only to different stakeholders and different types of crisis but also to the specific ideological milieu in which it operated. The ideological milieu provided the constraints as well as discursive resources for crisis communication; it defined the limits of what could be said as well as offered legitimate topics and themes to draw on for the organization in crisis.

Taking this institutional and situational character of crises and organizational responses to them into account offers a richer and indeed more complex understanding of the practice of organizational communication. More specifically, the present study illustrates the political character of organizational communication. Organizational communication in general, and perhaps crisis communication in particular, is undertaken within webs of power relations that constrain as well as enable the communicative practices undertaken by the organization. The ideological tension in which Swedish Match operated can be seen as an instance of such webs of institutionalized power relations.
Furthermore, the present study demonstrates how an organization, by means of skilful rhetoric, not only put itself in between collectivism and individualism but also managed to embrace and exploit both positions in one and the same response to a significant crisis. In that sense, the study highlights what Coombs (2000) and Benoit (1997) referred to as shifting the blame. The tobacco firm studied in this article seemed to engage in a double-edged reattribution of blame. The first reattribution was from the tobacco firm to the individual tobacco consumer. The second was from the tobacco firm to the collective (parliament, majority, history of state ownership). In that sense, the communicative strategies undertaken by the tobacco firm resemble what Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986), in the context of social movement organizations, labeled “frame alignment.” Frame alignment is the act of linking different interests, values, beliefs, and ideological positions in a mode that constructs different positions as congruent and complementary rather than antithetical and competitive. The embracement of both a collectivistic and individualistic discourse is a good illustration of how such a linkage can be accomplished in a highly polarized ideological milieu. More specifically, Swedish Match seemed to engage in the type of frame alignment Snow et al. referred to as “frame amplification” (p. 469). In the Swedish Match case, frame application involved picking out and stressing some values from incompatible systems of beliefs while obscuring others to incorporate, rather than refute, the critique of the organization’s active response to the lawsuit. Thus, critique and accusations are transformed from threats into discursive resources.

The present study of the embracing of two ideological poles as a communicative strategy highlights an area of critical studies of organizational communication, to wit, organizations’ appropriation of critique, resistance, and opposition. The case studied in this article is a good example of how the language of opposition and protest movement can be colonized by corporations and turned into useful discursive resources in their everyday business (cf. Callinicos, 2006, p. 59). The oppositional group A Non Smoking Generation is an organization that claims to represent the broader collective (i.e., the people). Its critique often assumes the form of a questioning of the broader support of the tobacco industry among the broad collective of citizens. What is interesting in this study is that the corporation, subjected to this kind of collectivist critique, managed to appropriate some of the language of critique and to turn it into a rhetorical weapon in its public defense strategy.

To some extent, this potential reappropriation of critique resides within critique itself. Arguably, critique, resistance, and opposition always run the risk of being appropriated by the objects of critique, ultimately of capitalism.
itself (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007, p. 487). New challenges for the critical study of organizational communication present themselves here. Insofar as the first task of critical research is to address critique of communicative practices, the second task, one that follows from the first, entails the study of how critique has been appropriated by corporations and incorporated in their communication. An example of this is Goldman and Papson’s (1996) discussion of advertising’s appropriation of critique and resistance.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of the present study include providing both journalists and policy makers with a way of critically studying organizations’ attempts to legitimize their enterprise in situations and environments in which critique is both harsh and prevalent (as in Sweden at the time of the lawsuit). The reattribution of blame and the frame alignment undertaken by the tobacco firm should hence be interpreted as ways for an organization to handle a highly polarized ideological milieu by means of exploiting it for its own purposes. In this sense, the ideological–contextual reading of crisis communication and image repair offered in the present article might be a fruitful method for journalists and other critical commentators engaged in scrutinizing organizations’ various attempts to escape responsibility and accountability. In today’s business world, when corporations habitually subscribe to the discourse of corporate socially responsible business, we need a sharper gaze to see through the symbolic and discursive responses to accusations. Only then can we get to the heart of what it means to be a “responsible” corporation.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

One of the limitations of this study is that it has not taken into account more than two actors in the debate related to the lawsuit. The political arena of communication in which the tobacco industry operates is much more complex than this. There are other oppositional groups and critical voices that deserve attention in future research along the lines drawn up in this article, such as researchers, politicians, and the medical industry.

Furthermore, the complex role of the state in relation to the tobacco industry has not been discussed in this study. The Swedish state is, or at least was at the time of the lawsuit, dependent on Swedish Match as an employer, taxpayer, and investment on the stock market (for the general pension funds). On the other hand, the state played a protective and biopolitical
role in relation to its citizens, providing legal constraints as to the marketing and selling of tobacco products. The tension between the economic and biopolitical interests of the state needs to be researched further to better understand the politics of crisis communication.

The various discursive closures and exclusions involved in this kind of postcrisis debate and image repair also deserve further research. What is not said, silenced, censored, and neglected is as important as that which is included in a public debate. The voices not permitted space in the public media are as important as those coming forward loud and clear in the public debate. Future research needs to address this silence of crisis communication.

Notes

1. Sweden has a strong tradition of organized antitobacco activities and groups. The organized opposition against the production and selling of tobacco started to emerge during the 19th century. A Non Smoking Generation, the most active and famous antitobacco organization nowadays, was established in October 1978 and has since been engaged in various antismoking campaigns.

2. In some parts of the article I draw on additional empirical data from 1996. The main reason for this is that a year or so of fairly critical public debates as to the tobacco industry preceded the actual lawsuit.

3. I am very grateful for the access to enter and work in this archive given to me by A Non Smoking Generation.

References


Peter Svensson (PhD, Lund University, Sweden) is associate professor in the Department of Business Administration at Lund University, Sweden. His research interests include marketing work, knowledge production in business life, marketing and management knowledge, critical management studies, and discourse analysis.