The invention of transitions: History as a symbolic site for discursive struggles over organizational change

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Abstract
Studies interested in the discursive use of ‘the past’ often view history as an organizational resource designed to create a shared origin and a common purpose, promoting a sense of continuity and commitment among organizational stakeholders. In this article, I view ‘history’ instead as a symbolic site for discursive struggles between proponents and opponents of organizational change. It shows how organizational actors use ‘traces’ of a collective past in their version of ‘the’ history to win consent for change and to counter competing views. They do so by creating a sense of discontinuity from the past. The case study presented in this article combines a historian’s account of a newspaper’s history with an ethnographic account of the use of history prevalent among newspaper editors. While the historian’s narrative suggests the continuance of some vigorous traditions alongside identity change, the editors narratively construct or ‘invent’ transitions between periods or episodes while disregarding the organization’s traditions in their everyday talk. Storying the past, present and future in terms of a temporal dichotomy and ‘inventing’ transitions departs from existing studies of rhetorical history that tend to highlight invented traditions which establish or reaffirm continuity with the past. The case analysis shows how the editors selectively and strategically deploy history to accomplish or oppose change as part of ongoing negotiations within the editorial staff.

Keywords
Business history, discourse, ethnography, future, organizational change, rhetorical history, time

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Introduction

In the recent surge of interest in the discursive use of ‘the past’, organizational scholars view history as an interpretive device and symbolic resource for marketing the organization, motivating action and managing change (e.g. Carroll, 2002; Rowlinson et al., 2014). Often, these studies show how organizational actors deploy history’s ‘symbolic gravitas and legitimacy’ (Suddaby et al., 2010: 163) by inventing or reinventing legendary ancestors or long-standing traditions to create, repair or reaffirm a sense of continuity, commonality, commitment and collective identity (e.g. Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). History is then seen as ‘imposing order and structure on subjects (sensemaking) in time’ (Suddaby et al., 2010: 167) and presenting the development of an organization ‘in an apparently seamless, linear and concrete fashion’ (Durepos et al., 2008: 63). Such an ‘order’ or ‘integrationist’ view (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 13) potentially blinds the researcher’s eye to history as a symbolic site for revolutionary vigour, radical change and discursive struggles. In this article, I view ‘history’ as a rallying point in ongoing negotiations between organizational members, a rhetorical instrument in the hands of both proponents and opponents of organizational change. Studies adopting a ‘conflict’ view show how challengers and custodians of the status quo contest, disrupt or reframe the meaning of the past, present and future by telling different, and sometimes competing, histories (e.g. McGaughey, 2013).

This article contributes to such ‘conflict’ studies by investigating how organizational actors use ‘rhetorical history’ (Suddaby et al., 2010), not to restore or reaffirm continuity, commonality, commitment and identity, but instead to gain support for change and to counter competing views by dislodging the past and creating a sense of discontinuity. Combining historical and ethnographic materials on the editorial staff of the Dutch national newspaper de Volkskrant, I present the distinct, and sometimes rivalling, versions of history authored by the editors and a historian’s reading of the newspaper’s past. The newspaper editors—acutely aware of the newspaper’s role in selecting and ‘storying’ events into news items and of themselves as prolific producers of ‘history’—are engaged in discursive struggles over the newspaper’s change of direction. They actively use the newspaper’s past, present and future as a rhetorical resource to influence future policies of news production. The analysis shows how the historian’s narrative builds its storyline around both continuities and discontinuities in the newspaper’s history, while the editor’s version of the collective past is dominated by a legendary succession of radical changes in the newspaper’s history. Consonant with what social historians somewhat ironically call ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm, 1983), we might capture the subjective nature of discontinuity talk in terms such as ‘invented revolutions’ (De Cock et al., 2007), ‘invented innovations’ or, pertaining to this case, ‘invented transitions’. While existing studies show that history is reshaped to either celebrate and/or forget practices and persons from the past (e.g. Anteby and Molnar, 2012), I show how the past is presented as either untenable and undesirable despite obvious accomplishments or, alternatively, considered as worth restoring or preserving in spite of its imperfections.

The argument proceeds as follows. First, I outline the theoretical argument in more detail. Second, I briefly introduce the empirical setting and explain the research methodology used in the case, as well as my discursive ‘take’ on analysing the data. I then present the historians’ narrative of the newspaper’s history and subsequently describe the ethnographic findings, which illustrate how editors reconstruct their collective past. An analysis of these various (re)constructions shows how the invention of transitions can be seen as an essential rhetorical strategy to instigate or resist change. I will conclude with some thoughts on the contribution of the analysis of the discursive use of the past, present and future to the literature on organizational change, a literature in which history ‘has so far been either entirely absent or at best of a “supplementarist” kind’ (Üsdiken et al., 2011: 3), generally viewing researching history as a fact-finding endeavour, rather than as an exploration of the production of stories built upon ‘traces’ of the past (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004).
Story and history

In the field of organization and management studies, there have been repeated calls for a research approach that is more sensitive to the role of history (e.g. Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Kieser, 1994; Rowlinson and Procter, 1999; Üsdiken et al., 2011) and, similarly, to the role of the past in social remembering and collective memory (e.g. Rowlinson et al., 2010). Meanwhile, organizational history and memory did gain some prominence in the literature. Some have taken an interest in longitudinal field studies and historical analysis of organizational cultures (e.g. Pettigrew, 1979), organizational or technological change (e.g. Van de Ven and Hubner, 1990) and strategic management (Van de Ven, 1992). Others took an explicitly subjective stance to studying history by focusing on the ways in which the past is remembered and appropriated to present an identity, to display emotion, to defend an interest or to establish a truth (e.g. Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Brunninge, 2009; Carroll, 2002; Parker, 2000; Ybema, 2004). Within the latter tradition, this article aims to make a contribution.

Research that takes an interest in representations of the past concentrates on the lived experience of people today and their interpretation of the past, that is, on ‘living history’ (e.g. Eriksen, 1993) or ‘remembered history’ (Rowlinson et al., 2010). Studies of living history recurrently showed that people’s narratives of the past tend to lend a highly selective and often idealized rendering of the historical ‘facts’, describing the past from a present-day point of view (e.g. Cohen, 1985; Eriksen, 1993): ‘The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized for exactly what it is. History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past’ (Berger, 1977: 11). Folk stories about the past or even detailed descriptions of a shared origin of an ethnic group are thus continuously revised ‘to match the mood of present times’ (Douglas, 1987: 69). Therefore, reflections of a collective past have little or nothing to do with historiography. It is a creative reconstruction, edited in hindsight. Borrowing Weick’s (1995: 55–61) words on stories, we may maintain that living history needs to be plausible, coherent, interesting, emotionally appealing and instrumental, rather than accurate. Such stories about former days do not so much inform us about the past, but rather inform us about people’s experience of, and preoccupations in, the present (Gabriel, 1993), that is, concerns of the present are imposed on the past (Suddaby et al., 2010).

Both history and its relation to present-day concerns can be helpful in understanding processes of organizational change. From the viewpoint of someone more interested in the past than the present, one might, on the one hand, object that studies centring on living history can hardly claim to be historical. Often, the past ‘inheres in such undiscriminating categories as “the old days”, “when I was young”, “in our ancestors’ time”’ (Cohen, 1985: 101). At best, organizational members offer little more than terse stories or a helicopter account of their collective history that flies fast from founding fathers to present-day heroes (e.g. Clark, 2000). By prioritizing present-day’s narrative representations over scrutinizing past events and developments in detail, history seems only a secondary interest. Historically minded ethnographers levelled this criticism at colleagues, accusing them of treating the present as a kind of ‘temporal plateau, coterminous with the duration of their fieldwork’, while the present is in fact ‘no sooner come than gone, really no more than the hinge between the past and the future’ (Peel in Eriksen, 1993: 6). The bias towards the here and now, aptly termed ‘presentism’ (e.g. Eriksen, 1993: 94–96), draws attention to the ways in which the present shapes our recollection of the past, while disregarding historical records. Yet, on the other hand, if we want to understand actors’ narrative sensemaking of the past, there is perhaps good reason to let ‘present word’ prevail over ‘past world’ in our analysis of ‘history’. For this reason, some interpretive researchers take a radical stance when they claim not to be interested in history per se, deliberately biasing their research towards the here and now. Paul Bate (1997), for instance,
when making a case for an anthropological approach to studying organizations, plainly states that ‘history should actually not be studied historically … It is in the everyday that the anthropologist searches for the past’ (p. 1156).

In this article, I seek middle ground, building on the assumption that studying history as well as present-day concerns can be helpful in understanding processes of reality construction (Berger and Luckmann, 1991 [1966]). Bringing together historiography and ethnography, I analyse how organizational members deploy the past as a symbolic resource for present-day sensemaking, while also offering background information on their sensemaking efforts by describing a historian’s account of the same history. As the past is ‘unrecoverable’, history is inevitably an interpretive act and a narrative construction (Weatherbee, 2012: 212)—a literary composition of past events into a story (Jenkins, 1991). We may thus examine not only the ‘storying’ efforts of the researched but also the researcher’s own ‘story work’. Narrativist historians and philosophers of history made the case that narrative is an essential and unavoidable component in history (Keulen and Kroeze, 2012; for a similar argument in relation to ethnographies, see, for example, Clifford, 1986). Historiographies are perhaps closer to literature than science, governed by rules of narration and aesthetic conventions. Since there is no ‘true’ or ‘hidden’ history to be ‘found’, the past can be seen as a building site for ‘construction work’ rather than as a foreign land to be discovered (Jenkins, 1991). Railing against an approach that views research into history as a fact-finding exercise, Clark and Rowlinson (2004) suggest to include the interpretation of what is discovered, and the production of stories. Historical studies ‘piece[e] together contextual “facts” selected by the historian to present a narrative idea or argument’ (Barrett and Srivastava, 1991: 244), using ‘traces’ of the past to reinforce today’s storied past (Rowlinson and Procter, 1999). The historian thus plays an active role in constructing a history. Analysing today’s storied past, I will focus specifically on the use of (dis)continuity as a narrative device in historical narratives.

**Invented traditions and transitions**

To highlight the subjectivity inherent in many historical claims, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) introduced the term ‘invented traditions’. They argued that communities often claim, falsely or imaginatively, that modern practices are a continuation of ancient rites and rituals. These traditions may ‘appear or claim to be old’, while in fact they ‘are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented’ (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1). Even if such ‘inventions’ are based in some form of tradition, this view suggests to direct attention to how they are inflated, distorted or biased toward a particular interpretation.1 Traditions are seen as deliberately created and promulgated for personal, commercial, political or national self-interest, ‘to enhance one’s legitimacy by exaggerating one’s antiquity’ (Zerubavel, 2003: 8). As Hobsbawm (1983) points out, the inclination of members of communities to invent or reinvent the past leads to the ‘curious paradox’ that ‘modern nations … generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in remotest antiquity’ (p. 14). Drawing on and brushing up a distant past may have a powerful effect because ‘mythological distance lends enchantment to an otherwise murky contemporary view’ (Cohen, 1985: 99). Members from ethnic communities, for instance, like to tell stories and celebrate heroic ancestors, rich traditions, legendary leaders or mythical achievements to brush up their collective self-image as a community (e.g. Cohen, 1985; Douglas, 1987; Eriksen, 1993; Roessingh, 2004). An excellent example from organizational studies is Booth et al.’s (2007) study of a German publisher. Sanctifying its role during World War II on its website, in a corporate history, and in public presentations, the company claimed that it had been shut down and harassed by the Nazis, while it was in fact successful during the war, publishing anti-Semitic material (Booth et al., 2007).
Usually, organizational studies highlight the role of history and invented traditions as a symbolic resource to convey, repair or reaffirm a sense of continuity, commonality and identity (e.g. Foster et al., 2011; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). This is a central idea underpinning Suddaby et al.’s (2010) discussion of ‘rhetorical history’. They view the history of a firm as ‘an organizational resource designed to confer identity, motivate commitment, and frame action amongst organizational stakeholders’ (Suddaby et al., 2010: 160). Empirical studies offer support for this view. For instance, Rowlinson and Hassard (1993) draw on the concept of invented tradition to show how a firm created a continuous, enduring narrative of enlightened labour-management, while keeping silent about slavery on the plantations supplying the firm’s cacao in the early 20th century (Rowlinson, 2002 in Rowlinson et al., 2010: 81). Similarly, Anteby and Molnar (2012) show how the authors of internal bulletins of an aircraft engine manufacturer preserved the firm’s identity in collective memory via repeated remembering as well as systematic forgetting contradicting elements (see Suddaby et al., 2010, for examples). Viewing rhetorical history as ‘a means of both inventing and infusing value in an organization’ (p. 162), these studies articulate how ‘managers skilfully impose meaning on a firm’s past’ (Foster et al., 2011: 104), developing ‘shared understandings about their firm’s history’ which allow to ‘uphold the firm’s identity’ (Anteby and Molnar, 2012: 518).

Tacitly adopting an ‘order’ or ‘integration’ view (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Martin, 2002), this line of research is premised upon the assumption that history is used to produce and promote historical continuity and collective identity. However, if we accept that history is ‘wonderfully malleable’ (Cohen, 1985: 101), actors may also produce conflicting readings of a common past and tell stories of revolutionary change to lend enchantment to an otherwise more prosaic present-day view of the past. Researchers studying history from a conflict or change perspective, by contrast, tend to shift attention away from a focus on ‘monological’ accounts of history and towards processes of negotiation between alternative and competing views (e.g. McGaughey, 2013). Seen from this perspective, history is part of a political process in which ‘actors try imputing or imposing interests upon others in hopes of enlisting them onto their cause’ (Durepos et al., 2008: 76). Instead of ascribing a high degree of agency to a single stakeholder, they bring into view discursive struggles between different stakeholders over the interpretation of the past. History is then understood as a multi-authored process of reality construction—the negotiation between different, and sometimes rivalling historical narratives. Such a perspective may be particularly helpful for understanding conflict-ridden processes of organizational change. Studies may then show how challengers and custodians of the status quo contest, disrupt or reframe the meaning of the past, present and future. McGaughey (2013)’s study of counterproductive attempts to remove an established lightning protection standard in the United States describes how challengers aimed at undermining the standard’s legitimacy by ‘discrediting history’, while custodians’ rhetorical strategy to draw upon the standard’s long and respectable history offered ‘a sense of continuity between past and future behaviours’ (McGaughey, 2013: 90–91).

This article builds on such ‘conflict’ studies by investigating how organizational actors use history as a rhetorical resource to gain support for change and to counter competing views by dislodging the past and creating a sense of dissent and discontinuity. The remembering or re-rendering of the past described here does not (re)invent traditions to establish or restore a connection with the past. Instead, it imagines a disconnection from the past by demonstrating historical ruptures. Such social ‘punctuation’ or ‘periodizing’ the past (Zerubavel, 2003: 85–100) interrupts, post hoc, the historical flow of contiguous events and retrospectively envisions a turning point, effectively ‘inventing’ a historic turn. Such clear-cut ‘periodization’ (Czarniawska, 1997: 116) allows to retrospectively cultivate the idea of a radical transformation in terms of a ‘before’ and ‘after’, an ‘until then’ and ‘ever since’. At the heart of this process are ‘the watersheds’ people collectively envision...
to separate one supposedly discrete historical ‘period’ from the next. Periodizing involves ‘mnemonic cutting’ and ‘pasting’—or ‘splitting’ and ‘lumping’—to compress what happened within any given ‘period’ and treat it as typical of that time, while inflating the symbolic divides separating temporal segments from one another (Zerubavel, 2003: 8, 82–83). In analogy with Hobsbawm’s ideas on invented traditions, such talk of transitions imagines novel ideas, identities or practices which may in fact be continuous with what was practised before. The ‘curious paradox’ in the case of invented transitions may thus be that even members of long-established, time-honoured institutions sometimes claim to be the opposite of traditional, namely, fashionably modern and forward-looking or, alternatively, tragically uprooted, divorced from their glorious past.

If the notion of invented tradition may inform our analysis of an organization’s efforts to establish continuity, the notion of invented transition has analytic purchase for the study of organizational change. During organizational upheaval, actors may engage in talk which creates symbolic distance between then and now, imagining the new replacing the old and seeking to construct a symbolic distinction between, for instance, ‘old’ and ‘new’ working methods, professions, workers and so on, and thus between those who are ‘suitable’ or ‘unsuitable’ for, or ‘capable’ or ‘incapable’ to, change (Berendse, 2013; see also, for example, Gouldner, 1954). When discursively constructing such an old/new bifurcation, social actors may narratively string together and split up past events in a standard plotline—for example, ‘progress’, ‘decline’, ‘rise and fall’—by placing a different value on each period. In a nostalgic narrative (Gabriel, 1993), for instance, ‘the romantic retouch of the past automatically pales the present’ (Ybema, 2004: 830), following the formulaic storyline of a tragic loss of The Golden Age (Davis, 1979; Gabriel, 1993). By contrast, a ‘nostophobic’ (Davis, 1979) or ‘postalgic’ narrative of change (Ybema, 2004) replaces nostalgia’s ‘good past/bad present’ (Davis, 1979: 15) with the ‘invention’ of a ‘bad past/great future’ contrast (e.g. Ybema, 2010). The narrativist approach to history adopted in this article takes as its primary analytic focus narrative devices such as continuity and discontinuity, progress and decline.

**Historiography and ethnography**

The argument in this article is inspired on a historical and ethnographic case study of the Dutch daily newspaper *de Volkskrant* and its editorial staff. As one of the major national newspapers in the country—*de Volkskrant* is a serious and rather critical morning paper with a wide circulation (more than 300,000 subscriptions at the time of the fieldwork), historians have offered detailed descriptions of *de Volkskrant’s* history (see Hemels, 1981; Sommer, 1993; Van Vree, 1996). The historical narrative presented in this article is based primarily on Van Vree’s study, which describes *de Volkskrant’s* professional, ideological and commercial development until the mid-1990s. Van Vree’s (1996) study is based on archival research (he was given access to the newspaper’s archives) and retrospective interviews with (former) editors. Although the publishing company sponsored the project, Van Vree’s history of the newspaper does not read as a laudation of the newspaper’s ‘monumental’ history, a heroic tale. Yet, writing a history in itself lends enchantment to the past. And Van Vree’s narration (and my rendering of it) is not ‘outside’ narrative conventions. In the analysis section, I will focus on the underlying narrative structure of this history.

After the historian’s narrative, I will describe the ways in which the editors discuss, defend and defy the changes the newspaper was undergoing in the 1990s and early 2000s, a few years after the new editor-in-chief launched new plans and policies to redirect the newspaper’s journalistic and ideological course. These discussions were recorded during 7 months of fieldwork in 1998 and in follow-up interviews in 2002 (Ybema, 2003). In this case study, an ethnographic, inductive approach was adopted (Ybema et al., 2009). The research process was characterized by the interchange between findings stemming from different sources and methods. I attended formal and
informal meetings to get insight into the recurring themes in discussions about the newspaper’s editorial policies and character. A total of 32 formal (planned), semi-structured interviews of duration 1 to 2 hours and numerous informal (spontaneous) conversations provided a more in-depth understanding of the editors’ motivations and impressions concerning the newspaper’s development. Document analysis focused, inter alia, on minute books, marketing reports and questionnaire research administered to the editorial staff. In 2002, an additional round of 10 interviews focused on new developments in relation to the newspaper’s history.

During the fieldwork period, I adopted the role of ‘simultaneous insider/outsider’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). By shadowing central figures in the editorial staff during the everyday production of the newspaper, as well as attending receptions and joining editors during lunch and evening drinks, I endeavoured to build rapport with the editors and to become familiar with their everyday talk. At the same time, I tried to ensure a more distanced view and to preserve an outsider’s role (Yanow et al., 2012; Ybema and Kamsteeg, 2009). Some journalists seemed highly suspicious that I would want to make headlines with my research, in a journalistic fashion. To overcome this, I positioned myself as someone not interested in headlines and scoops, and whose ‘academic book’ would not be out for at least a year to come. This made them more cooperative, albeit puzzled at the value of such, in their eyes, ‘outdated’ data.

In the analysis of the historical and ethnographic data, I specifically focus on temporal discourse and the narrative construction of temporal continuities and discontinuities. Discussing historical analyses of subjectivity in organizational contexts, Newton (2004) argues that social theorists may favour historical discontinuity over continuity or vice versa, while in fact such historical positions are not mutually exclusive. Quoting McCloskey (p. 1379), he maintains that continuity and discontinuity are ‘narrative devices, to be chosen for their storytelling virtues’. This view underpins the analysis in this article. I analyse (dis)continuity as a narrative device in Van Vree’s history of de Volkskrant and in the editors’ temporal narratives or, rather, in my co-constructed and edited version of the editors’ and the historian’s narratives. The combination of historical and ethnographical data allows to show both how ‘history’ can provide an understanding of present-day discussions and how the past and present and future are selectively and strategically deployed within these discussions in order to meet present-day interests.

A historian’s corporate history

To provide background to the case study and to explore historians’ narrative moves in terms of ‘inventing’ or constructing historical connections or disruptions, I will first describe (my edited version of) Hemels’ and, in particular, Van Vree’s account of de Volkskrant’s history. In the second, ethnographically informed part of the case description, we move from the genre of ‘corporate history’ (Delahaye et al., 2009) to the realm of remembered history. Here, I describe the various ways in which editors make use of the newspaper’s past in their discussions of present-day changes.

From ‘Catholic’ to ‘Progressive’

Van Vree tells a story of transitions as well as traditions, although, as evidenced in the book’s title ‘The metamorphosis of a newspaper’, he particularly highlights historical discontinuity. According to Van Vree, remoteness from everyday detail is required to see the newspaper’s ‘metamorphosis’. A comparison between de Volkskrant in the 1950s and the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, shows ‘sharp contrasts’ but not a ‘clean break’ or ‘sudden turns’ (Van Vree, 1996: 9): ‘The ruptures emerge when distancing oneself from the contents of the newspaper and the countless notes, memos and minutes in the archives: only then the contours of what might rightfully be called a cultural
revolution become visible’ (Van Vree, 1996: 9–10). A distanced view allows to paint developments in broad-brush strokes, tracing out a transition through dividing history in periods and marking these as distinct from each other. Following suit, I will show how Van Vree frames *De Volkskrant’s* history in terms of transformations from one ‘identity’ to another.

During the period from its foundation in 1919 up to the 1960s, *De Volkskrant* was seen as a symbol of social Catholicism. The newspaper was set up as the organ of its founder and owner, the Catholic workers’ union. At the time, close ties between newspapers and unions or political parties were not uncommon in the Netherlands and newspapers often served as the symbol and voice of different societal groups or ‘pillars’. For at least half a century, Dutch society was socially, politically and culturally compartmentalized in a Catholic, Protestant, Reformed, socialist and (the less well-organized) liberal ‘pillar’, with many organizations (schools, hospitals, political parties, unions, sports clubs) tightly linked to one of these pillars (Bax, 1988; Lijphart, 1986). *De Volkskrant* was no exception. The editors were deeply committed to the Catholic case, stuck to the normative rules and regulations that were in force within the Catholic community and, as a union paper, provided the Catholic working class with its own medium of expression (Hemels, 1981: 182).

In the years after World War II, the pillarized structure persisted. *De Volkskrant* still had close ties with the Catholic political party (Van Vree, 1996: 32–34), although the Editor-in-Chief had no connection with the union, nor a crucifix on the wall. A journalist trained in the United Kingdom, his aim was to make an eye-catching newspaper from a journalist’s point of view, characterized by breaking news, a clear format, a concise style and lightweight features. He once sent a message to fellow pillarized organizations that publicity should not be equated with public relations (‘a paper is not a pulpit’), but he too remained loyal to the Catholic ‘trinity’ of party, union and church. *De Volkskrant*—and with it the entire press in the pillarized and pacified Netherlands—was prepared to keep quiet about conflicts and scandals within its own ‘pillar’, while publicly disapproving of the non-Christian socialist and liberal groups. In 1954, it also supported the Bishop’s Mandate forbidding Catholics to be a member of nondenominational organizations.

Ten years later, in 1964, the publisher and several key editors forced the chief editor to leave, being annoyed with his peremptory regime. His successor, the editors’ rebellion leader, adopted a democratic leadership style and paved the way for a more progressive newspaper. In 1965, it was decided to delete the subtitle ‘Catholic daily for the Netherlands’. In an editorial, the chief editor maintained that the staff would continue to make a Catholic newspaper and would not ‘camouflage this’, while also stressing that the paper advocated an ‘open Catholicism’ and did not want to ‘hide behind barriers’. According to Van Vree (1996), a transition period began that was marked by internal disputes and a remarkable diversity in the contents of the paper: moderate versus progressive editorials, Christian versus ecumenical articles and conventional versus critical columns. In this process, *De Volkskrant* slowly took up a more radical position (Van Vree, 1996). Instead of a mouth-piece, the paper served more and more as a critical sounding board for the Catholic party and the Catholic Church, and eventually turned its back on party and church, increasingly ‘translating’ faith into social engagement (Van Vree, 1996). In its editorials, the paper argued for progressive policies and critical or avant-garde opinions pervaded the paper’s political analyses, the foreign news, columns and illustrations and even the sports news, TV features and reviews. The less well-off groups in society could count on the sympathy and solidarity of the editors, a practice that was legitimized by the identity statement (laid down in the editorial statute) that declared the paper would ‘stand up for the oppressed and persecuted’.

Van Vree situates the ‘radicalization of *De Volkskrant’ (Van Vree, 1996: 7) within a broader process of societal reordering in which the pillarization within Dutch society made way for a more loosely organized polarization along social–political lines (Bax, 1988; Lijphart, 1986). While the overall circulation figure of Dutch newspapers increased in the 1950s and 1960s, most pillarized
papers experienced a decline in readership due to their reader’s weakening commitment to the traditional pillars. For (young) readers, remaining loyal to their own pillar was no longer self-evident. Several pillarized papers disappeared, merged or changed into weeklies (Schneider and Hemels, 1979) and *de Volkskrant*’s publisher was the subject of a merger in 1968 when a new firm was established (*de Perscombinatie*, later called *PCM Publishers*). While most Christian organizations slowly departed from their original principles and ideas with the crumbling-away of the pillars, *de Volkskrant* ‘revealed itself more and more as one of the most important supporters of de-pillarization and secularisation’ in Dutch society (Van Vree, 1996: 7). The close connections between the Catholic union (still the paper’s main shareholder) with the socialist union facilitated an ideological transformation to a decisively leftist, non-Christian one, a process that took about 5 or 6 years of time (Van Vree, 1996). And so, the largest Dutch Catholic newspaper—‘one of the cornerstones of the Catholic pillar’ (Van Vree, 1996: 10)—ended up in the ‘red nest’. While it lost many of its lower educated, traditionally Catholic readers, *de Volkskrant* gradually rose to being one of the most popular daily newspapers in the country and a symbol of, as quoted from a weekly paper in 1977, ‘the ostentatiously leftist elite that populates the universities and the ‘soft’ sector’ (in Hemels, 1981: 346). The paper’s paid circulation steadily increased from 165,000 in 1965 to over 210,000 in 1975, and to more than 270,000 in 1985 (market share ascended from 4.6% to 6.1% in the same period), marking the success of *de Volkskrant*’s ‘cultural revolution’ (Van Vree, 1996: 10).

**From ideological to professional**

The late 1970s and early 1980s figure as the temporal setting of a new ‘radical turn’ (1996: 184) in Van Vree’s version of *de Volkskrant*’s history. After the transition from a Catholic to a progressive newspaper, *de Volkskrant* suffered from ‘dogmatism’ and ‘activist, prejudiced journalism’ (Van Vree, 1996: 188, 172). Without blindly following their political agendas, the newspaper acted as a critical advocate of the unions, the labour party, feminists, students, squatters, environmentalists and the critical ranks within the social-democratic party PvdA (Dutch Labour Party) (Van Vree, 1996: 160). According to a deputy chief in 1982, in hindsight, *de Volkskrant* was still ‘pillarized’ and ‘sectarian’ at the time (Van Vree, 1996: 188), still preaching the truth, albeit from a different pulpit. Its tone and stance became the object of derision and criticism in the 1980s when *de Volkskrant* grew into being one of the largest papers in the Netherlands (Van Vree, 1996: 157–60). Politicians, journalists and writers condemned, for instance, its ‘self-righteous moralism’, the combination of ‘communist sermonising’ and ‘football fun’, or its ‘senseless nagging and pestering’. Although the editors were hardly impressed with outside criticism (circulation kept on rising) and some stoically persisted in their way of working, Van Vree (1996) points out that this criticism did feed internal protests against ‘the lack of professional distance’ in what was called ‘confession-journalism’: journalists professing ‘faith’ (social involvement) or trying to influence the political and public opinion in their work.

Seeking to restore the primacy of journalistic values and critical independency (Van Vree, 1996: 182–94), the paper started a ‘reorientation’ to find ‘the way back to journalistic values and critical independence, while retaining progressive values’ (Van Vree, 1996: 189). Sooner than ‘many dared hoping for’ the ‘tide turned’ and the newspaper’s ‘journalistic and political reorientation reached the end’ when the new Editor-in-Chief took office in 1982 (Van Vree, 1996: 196). In Van Vree’s (1996) narrative, the 1980s were then marked by ‘a gradual, but irreversible change of the newspaper’s course and the relations in the editorial staff’ (p. 182). The staff embraced ‘more businesslike’ and ‘professionalized policies’ (p. 199), sobering up leftist movement’s ideas and ideals. Rather than a revival of the 1950s’ focus on news—a tradition that moved to the background in this
period—the emphasis on professionalism involved higher educational demands, writing courses, tighter editorial policies and higher intellectual standards. The paper attempted to remain attractive for different groups within society, but in the 1980s, it was mainly read by a (leftist) elite of relatively young and highly educated readers (Van Vree, 1996). Paid circulation gradually increased on from 270,000 in 1985 to nearly 360,000 in 1995 (the market share in the same period went up from 6.1% to 7.7%). When circulation figures and income from advertisements stopped growing in the 1990s (they started declining by the end of the 1990s), ideology was also rivalled out by a market orientation. In the same period, formal and informal relations became more ‘professional’ as well with the number of editors having grown fast from 60 to 70 editors in the 1950s and 1960s, to 150 in the 1980s and 250 in the 1990s (Van Vree, 1996). When in 1995 a new Editor-in-Chief and three deputies were appointed, the plenary decision was made to extend the leading role of the Editors-in-Chief and to put an end to what was called the staff’s ‘meeting culture’ or its ‘long tradition of plenar naval-gazing’.

**The editors’ remembered past**

In their everyday discussions of the newspaper contents, characteristics and qualities, editors of *de Volkskrant* frequently refer to the past of the newspaper. They are not primarily interested in the newspaper’s history as such. It is the putative past in relation to *de Volkskrant*’s present and future, and in particular the present-day transformation the paper is undergoing, that interests them. In the ethnographic narrative described in this section, the various ways in which editors construct transitions is the central focus.

**Change and crisis**

In the editors’ discourse on the newspaper, the present-day figures as a time of transition. In their eyes, processes of professionalization and de-ideologization rendered the identity of this former social-democratic bulwark problematic, burdening the newspaper with a somewhat negative external image. In a time of increasing competition and dropping revenues from advertisements and subscriptions, the editors had to seek new answers to the identity question now that old answers were considered to be inadequate, unsatisfactory or out of date. Yet, new answers were not readily available or did not easily satisfy everyone. And so, the newspaper’s ‘character’ or ‘profile’—a prominent symbol of the editors’ collective identity—had become the subject of policies for ‘strategic re-profiling’ and a matter of continuous negotiation among staff members. How did the editors experience the situation and how did they talk about today’s newspaper and its traditions?

One of the few issues editors agreed upon easily was that traditional ideological distinctions were ‘blurring’ or ‘ebbing’ in the 1990s. It was no longer self-evident that a paper would take a particular (or, indeed, any) political stand. The ideological tradition had come to be seen within the staff as stigmatizing the paper as written by ‘overly critical, left wing faultfinders’. Professional distance was considered to be more important and a pronounced left-wing stance had fallen out of favour within the staff. The putative transition from ‘ideological’ to ‘professional’ was seen as inevitable and problematic. As a result, *de Volkskrant* had been carried along to the political middle, resulting in an ideologically less distinct identity. Fundamental questions arose such as: What do we stand for? Do we still stand for anything? What makes this paper different from other newspapers?

These questions appeared to be difficult to answer. When talking about the newspaper’s identity, the editors readily pointed out that there was a lack of continuity, clarity and distinctiveness. There was frequent talk of an ‘identity crisis’ and editors called for ‘clarity and ‘direction’. Where
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was the paper heading? In what direction should it be heading? The confusion within the staff was assumed to be typical of the identity crisis faced by all ideologically left-wing, progressive institutions in the 1990s. Over and again, editors claimed that today, in contrast with the old days, a clear and uniting perspective was missing: ‘We lost our fixed frame of reference. It used to be a stable period, to the point of ossification. Now we are a little free-floating. It flutters in all kinds of directions’. The rather confusing and conflict-ridden situation of the present was measured against the presumed ideological clarity and social cohesion of former years.

The tendency to draw distinctions between the past and the present—and thus to ‘invent’ transitions the newspaper was assumed to be undergoing—was prevalent among Volkskrant editors, although the past did not always figure as a distant world of clarity, comfort and consensus. Often, the left-wing Volkskrant of former days stood for unrealistic ideals, a false belief of moral superiority and a politically biased and rather presumptuous journalistic style. Although the traditional values were not irrelevant for today’s newspaper, in some important ways the ‘old’ Volkskrant did symbolize a superseded past. At the same time, however, there seemed to be no ready-made alternatives at hand for the traditional values, at least none that were acceptable and inspirational to all. Not many saw a vital alternative in present-day editorial policies or chief editors’ decisions. Often editors were equally negative about the paper’s present outlook as they were about the paper’s past.

While political, commercial and professional developments made the editors reconsider their former ideological stance and adjust their journalistic approach, plans to make a new start and radically break with the old ideological tradition were certainly not unquestioned or unchallenged. And so, the situation at de Volkskrant was not only one of crisis and confusion, it was also one of conflicting views and contention. The editors could not agree on which course to embark. The conflict was fought out in formal gatherings and informal conversations, plenary meetings and discussion groups. The contents of the paper often gave rise to conflicts when editorial decisions were disputed because editors disagreed about the role or relative weight given to new journalistic criteria, commercial imperatives or social engagement. The emotional and politicized tone of discussions within the staff made clear that the issues touched upon some of the editors’ fundamental professional and ideological beliefs. To shed light on the conflict, I will outline the different positions taken by the editors, the discourses they deployed and the lines of demarcation they drew. Interestingly, the controversies about the present-day ‘profile’ of the paper appeared to be closely related to the different value ascribed to the newspaper’s past, present and future identity.

Conflict and change

One powerful voice within the editorial staff was one that railed against the inheritance of the newspaper’s left-wing ideological past (and the derivatives thereof) in order to promote a rather drastic change of direction. The new staff of chief editors most forcefully propagated this past-unfriendly, change-oriented discourse. Having internalized the negative image that the public was supposed to have of the ‘left-wing’ Volkskrant they labelled their own paper as ‘predisposed’, ‘predictable’, ‘patronizing’, thrusting an overly sombre worldview on its readers. According to them, the steady growth of readership and lack of direct competition in the 1980s, together with the idealism and preference for social issues (third-world poverty, welfare mothers, union news and the like), had grown a rather self-assured, opinionated attitude that was indifferent to readers’ wishes. This stinging self-criticism laid the foundation of a change in the newspaper’s journalistic policies. Right from the moment he got appointed in 1995, the new editor-in-chief clearly voiced his discontent with the character and contents of the paper that, he assured, was ‘bloody sour’, as he liked to call it. In public interviews, he explained that he was trying to change the paper, because, before he started, it was ‘predictable’, had ‘a cranky overtone’, was ‘too much a newspaper of
political notes and union reports’: ‘Clearly, the paper had to change: it should become less predictable, more curious, open and frivolous’ (Opzij, November 1998). He relegated the leftist leanings of the paper to the past:

One thing is sure: the conscience of de Volkskrant no longer lies on the left-right axis. We are done with that social-political distinction. Competing on ideology is passé. We have to compete on tone and taste now. On transparency, structure and selection. Why wouldn’t that be the paper’s conscience? (Editor-in-Chief, Elsevier, 21 March 1998)

Together with a new team of chief editors, he started to place a strong emphasis on the diversity of political opinion makers (including liberal and conservative voices), reports ‘from the streets’ (while banning union news from the front page) and popular culture, in order to lighten the paper’s intellectual, left-wing image and to serve the increasing number and variety of readers.

At the time of the research, these changes were well under way and heavily discussed. The new journalistic policies got some support within the staff. The youngest editors in particular were in favour of breaking taboos on popular news, as they did not consider journalistic quality and popular news to be an either/or-issue. They envisioned a newspaper that would bring the popular news, while maintaining high, but non-highbrow standards. In their eyes, de Volkskrant had grown into a rather elitist paper that all too often turned up its nose at the interests of ‘ordinary people’ who ask questions such as the following: What happened in the streets last night? Who won the Eurovision Song festival? Who is the girl that is dating the Dutch crown prince? They agreed with the editors-in-chief that the paper should return to street-level journalism and popular culture coverage, provided that the paper would preserve its professional qualities. For them, the emphasis on professionalism also entailed that the staff would abandon its political roots and would make a strictly professional, non-political newspaper without a social bias (curiously, in 2002, the new ‘youngsters’ within the staff—the ‘children of the hippie-generation’ so to say—argued in favour of a revaluation of social, left-wing ideals).

Despite the support from the youngsters, most editors were rather critical of the new policies. Most of them shared the chief editors’ critique of the paper, but they were opposed to the change-of-course at the same time. One editor, for instance, while having a grim look on his face, sceptically summarized the transformation of the newspaper as follows: ‘We used to be left wing and cynical and now we are liberal and frothy’. Most editors thought that de Volkskrant used to be too critical and ‘sour’, but many among them were opposed to a practice of putting popular news (such as Spice Girls-mania or news about the royal family) on the front page. This was considered trivial, cheap and banal entertainment that represented an unprofessional, marketing-like approach, meant only to serve a broad reading public. One editor said, for instance, ‘de Volkskrant is popularising. It needs to be done light-heartedly these days. Not too serious. Today we aim at an audience that is hardly interested in political matters and that does not appreciate difficult subjects’.

The popularization particularly annoyed an old(er) guard of editors. They emphasized they agreed with the lightening up of the sombre negativism of the paper and the sobering up of the editors’ left-wing idealism, but they regretted that today’s paper seemed to be finished with the past altogether. They had been dedicated for many years to write a quality newspaper with high intellectual standards, a warm social involvement and a critical stance towards the establishment, thus creating a distinct profile by maintaining some of the old characteristics of the newspaper. In comparison, today’s Volkskrant appeared in their comments on the current policies as rather populist, uncritical and lacking inspiration. Sometimes they hardly seemed to appreciate their own newspaper anymore: ‘Today we lack this passion of really wanting to get to the bottom of things [that used
to be characteristic of the early *Volkskrant*, and this has changed *de Volkskrant* into a colourless, bleak and bland paper’.

The opposition within the staff tried to reconnect the paper with qualities associated with the paper’s past as a high-quality, intellectual, critical and socially engaged newspaper, while keeping up with the demands of new times and new readers by advocating a ‘realistic’, ‘light-hearted’ kind of social involvement. ‘Keeping up with the “societal swing”’ was considered to be typical of *de Volkskrant* and all editors believed it had always been a major strength of *de Volkskrant* to be able to change. The paper was ‘opportunistic and chameleonic’, as one editor puts it, referring to the paper being Catholic in the 1950s and 1960s, left wing in the 1970s and 1980s, and ‘popular’ in the 1990s. Some named it ‘Catholic docility’, ‘spinelessness’ or ‘swimming with the tide’; others called it ‘journalistic sensitivity’, ‘shrewd positioning’ or ‘innovative flexibility’; but all agreed that it had been a constant characteristic of the paper throughout its history: ‘*De Volkskrant* was left wing in the 1970s and “in the political middle” in the 1990s and thus always follows the latest fashion: we always change colour exactly on time’.

### Analysis and discussion

Where social actors explicitly draw on a shared past to add a mythological import to today’s beliefs and practices, this is often conceived as a reinvention of tradition. The creative imagining of a common history to establish a sense of continuity, consensus and collective identity is well-demonstrated in many studies. Likewise, the case study presented in this article addressed the reinvention of the personal, social and political import of a putative past in contemporaneity, albeit in different ways and for different purposes. Organizational actors drew heavily on the temporal dimension to make sense of the present situation, thus rhetorically using their collective history. They did so, however, not to reaffirm or repair continuity, consensus and identity, but instead to gain support for identity change and to counter competing views by inventing transitions. Such invented transitions do not draw a straight line running from past to present and into the future, but instead build on temporal contrasts, transforming scattered events into seemingly coherent historical narratives of rupture and schisms. Engaged in discursive struggles over new policies and practices, the editors of a newspaper sought to establish a sense of discontinuity by dislodging the past. In this section, I will analyse the ‘storying’ or ‘emplotting’ of the past in terms of transitions in detail and discuss a few implications for studying rhetorical history and organizational change.

First, I will explore the invented or constructed nature of history, focusing on discontinuity as a narrative device. Examples drawn from the case study illustrate that history can be told in many different ways, framing it as continuous or discontinuous. The editors all presented the chief editors’ de-politicizing ‘reforms’ and, for instance, their decision to ban union news from the front page, as breaking away from the paper’s ideological past. One could argue equally well, however, that earlier developments are a prelude to such ‘new’ policies and practices. Van Vree’s version of *de Volkskrant*’s history suggests that the chief editor in the 1950s already emphasized that a newspaper was not a ‘pulpit’, and the left-wing, progressive course of *de Volkskrant* received criticism for its political bias and radical idealism in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the paper had gradually adjusted to more professional, less ideological standards. From this vantage point, the policies of the new team of chief editors did not constitute a sudden sweep or radical turn. They merely strengthened a long-term process or a long-standing tradition of professionalism. And while making the paper ideologically more diverse and pushing its social engagement and union bias into the background, the grumbling opposition in the staff managed to mitigate the potential radicality of these reforms by heeding the paper’s social tradition and remaining sympathetic to left-wing idealism.
In a similar vein, we may also read editors’ presentation of chief editors’ choice for street-level journalism against the grain. In Hemels’ and Van Vree’s historical narratives, the newspaper became a non-elitist, newsy, nationally oriented paper for the middle classes after World War II; gradually turned into a slightly intellectual, elitist, professionalized newspaper in the 1970s and 1980s; and took on a renewed interest in light-hearted entertainment and ‘fast news’ from 1995 onwards. We may thus view the development of de Volkskrant’s journalistic profile as a succession of transitions, a slow pendulum motion between analysis, opinion and background information on the one hand and street-level journalism on the other, between intellectualism and entertainment and between upper and lower class readers. Equally well, however, one could read into the newspaper’s history a relatively stable, middle-of-the-road position as a journalistic product and an enduring tension between advocates of more extreme positionings. The traditional choice is to produce a newspaper that is somewhere in-between an intellectual opinion paper and an accessible newspaper, with relatively small shifts in emphasis over the years. Whenever the pendulum swings away from the equilibrium position, opponents take up arms to limit the amplitude, precluding the editorial staff from taking up an extreme position. From this point of view, the chief editors’ policies starting in 1995 can be seen as an attempt, not to make radical changes but merely to moderate the Volkskrant’s intellectualism of the 1980s and to balance it with the tradition of de Volkskrant as a street-level paper. The persistence of tensions around the issue within the staff functions as a counterbalancing force preserving the equilibrium.

So, the Volkskrant’s history can be read as a succession of ruptures and revolutionary change, as well as the constant heeding of long-standing traditions—a story of stability, solidity and continuity. There are sufficient ‘traces’ of the past to back up either story. And wherein internal debates editors spoke of radical change and sudden ruptures, such ‘transitions’ can also be viewed as attempts to preserve or restore traditions as well.2 Given the plasticity of the past, it is the (hi)storyteller’s choice which story to tell or what plot to choose: one centred on traditions or one focusing on transitions. The Volkskrant editors prefer the latter.

Since the images of constant and fundamental change contain an element of distortion and exaggeration and their story is thus a selective and rather dramatized one, how exactly do the editors ‘edit’ a history of transitions? While discussing the newspaper’s contents and profile in their everyday talk, the Volkskrant editors constantly made explicit or implicit comparisons between the collective past, present and future by explaining how the paper ‘used to be’, what it is ‘today’, what is ‘passé’ or ‘no longer’, where it is ‘heading’ and so on. More often than not, these comparisons drew a sharp temporal contrast, following the simple formula: ‘In the past we used to be X; now we are Y’. When editors occasionally referred to traditions, they approvingly or disapprovingly claimed the newspaper broke with them. So, rather than a gradual evolutionary process, they told ‘staccato narratives’ (Zerubavel, 2003: 34–35), which consist of ‘discrete historical episodes separated from one another by pronounced breaks marking abrupt, rapid changes’. The editors claimed change was the only stable factor, suggesting that turmoil and transformation were typical of the newspaper and the paper had ‘always been opportunistic and chameleonic’ or ‘always follow[ed] the latest fashion’. Interestingly, the historian’s version makes the newspaper’s history resonate with ruptures and radical transformations as well, but he adds historical detail and nuance. Dividing a long series of events, people and newspapers into chapters in a book, he periodizes de Volkskrant’s history, ascribing particular stories and identities to each period. Whereas editors talk in terms of sharp, sudden, rather unspecified breaks, Van Vree (1996: 116) suggests change took years and should be seen as a step-by-step process rather than a historical rupture. Applying the rhetorical strategy of periodization to the change process itself, he speaks of periods of transition characterized by disputes and diversity. He points at symbolic turning points, such as the resignation and appointment of an Editor-in-Chief or the deletion of the paper’s subtitle, but he claims change can
only be seen when taking a distanced, generalizing view, because a more detailed look would suggest that watershed moments do not exist. By contrast, the editors adopt temporal templates and stereotypes (‘we used to be …, now we are …’), sketching developments in broad-brush strokes, suggesting radical transitions and sudden turning points. Without specifying exactly when and how, they point at symbolic markers of change, such as new editorial policies or practices. Tersely, they tell a schematic, imprecise ‘story’ of a sudden turn to lend drama to developments that might otherwise perhaps seem rather unremarkable and insubstantial.

The editors’ invented transitions not only draw a sudden, sharp historic rupture, but also clearly paint the past in a particular colour by adding a value judgment. The temporal images are simple and straightforward, and hardly neutral: de Volkskrant used to be ‘sour’, ‘prejudiced’, ‘predictable’; while today it is ‘open’, ‘curious’, ‘frivolous’ or ‘bleak’ and ‘frothy’. The change talk is rhetorically organized in two oppositional narratives that both offer a symbolic-political reading of reality. These readings are either aimed at supporting or resisting the changes introduced by the editorial management. The more dominant narrative reacts against the sombre negativism of leftist journalism and labours for a more light-hearted, liberal newspaper. It successfully drives the counternarrative, which favours social commitment and critical journalism, into a defensive position. In both narratives, past traditions and planned innovations are valued differently, drawing a temporal contrast between the two. Typical of the dominant narrative is the postalpic valuing of the future and simultaneous devaluing of the past, while the nostalgic counternarrative idealizes the past and simultaneously de-idealizes present changes and future plans.

The invention of transitions can thus be seen against the backdrop of internal negotiations over new policies. In discursive struggles over organizational change, invented transitions—like invented traditions—evoke a collective past and annexe earlier events, practices or experiences to express a belief, to establish a truth, and to defend an interest. In Brunninge’s (2009: 23) words: ‘Actors pick and refer to those parts of history that best suit their purposes, either as a positive forerunner of their own ideas or as a terrible warning not to choose an option they disapprove of’. In this case, one dominant narrative used the past as a terrible warning, a springboard for moving on to building the future. The newspaper’s past was being held up to scorn to push people forward, away from the past and towards a new bright future. To defend ‘postalpic’ plans, they emplotted their own policies as long-awaited, ambitious change. The counternarrative reversed this framing of the newspaper’s history by picturing the present and future in relation to the past as marking the tragic disappearance or demise of cherished traditions. In order to challenge change and to defend such ‘endangered’ or ‘destroyed’ traditions, this narrative embraced a romanticized version of the past and pictured it nostalgically as a ‘positive forerunner’ and an example worth following. The invention and nostalgic or postalpic distortion of historic ruptures were thus an attempt to disenchant or re-enchant a mythological past as part of a political struggle over change.

In sum, the analysis in this article demonstrates how the past was selectively and strategically reconstructed to fit the rhetorical arguments of different parties in a conflict over change and thus ‘to bend to present needs’ (Cohen, 1985: 101). It pictures the internal politics of organizational change as a symbolic site where different versions of history converge and collide, attempting to redefine relationships between a collective past, present and future. They do so by drawing sharp and sudden temporal breaks and subsequently by attaching contrasting and conflicting meanings to ‘old’ practices and to ‘new’ plans and policies. Organizational actors, each with their different remembered histories, are constantly engaged in imposing or opposing schemes of temporal periodization; continually challenging and redefining opponents’ demarcation and designation and introducing their own periodizing labels in attempts to reinforce or combat change. This shows some of the ways in which organizational actors may draw upon the past as a means to reframe and reform the present in times of organizational upheaval.
I want to make three concluding remarks. First, I want to underline that the combination of ethnographical and historical materials proved helpful for the narrativist analysis of the role of history in processes of change. The historian’s historical narrative contextualized the editors’ present-day concerns, the positions they took, the arguments they used and the identities they constructed within the internal disputes. A presentist account, without any historical background to these discursive struggles, is like ‘living in a two-dimensional Flatland’ (Zerubavel, 2003: 38). The wider social and historical context adds a third dimension to our understanding of the micro-politics of identity processes. Conversely, the contribution of an ethnographic analysis of myths, legends or stories about the past is to understand the relevance of a collective history for present-day concerns. For laymen, historicity and accuracy are not major concerns. Their accounts of the past are concerned primarily with feelings, beliefs, interests, opinions and identities; for them, a collective history is not historiography, nor a stroll along memory lane. In this case, combining ethnographical with historical data and focusing analytic attention on language offered particular advantages for the analysis of the selective and strategic use of the putative past in order to meet present-day interests. Through language, the editors authored various versions of the newspaper’s history in terms of discontinuities. More specifically, the historians’ account of the newspaper’s history offers an additional analytic vantage point from which to examine editors’ temporal discourse which sensitized me to the editors’ frequent talk of turning points and transformations. While the historian’s narrative of the newspaper’s history built its storyline around both continuities and discontinuities, the editors’ version of the collective past imagined a history of successive radical transformations which, although not entirely fabricated, displayed elements of simplification, exaggeration and distortion. And so, in this case, the historian’s divergent account of the newspaper’s past allowed to ‘demystify’ or ‘puncture the legend’ (Rowlinson and Procter, 1999: 387) created in memory’s discourse or, at least, to put the editors’ remembered history into a different perspective.

Second, for research into invented transition, I recommend paying attention to imaginings of the future alongside re-renderings of the past. The upsurge of interest in history is not equalled by a similar interest in representations of the future. The historian’s predilection to study the past might explain the temporal bias towards stories of bygone days. If, however, we take an interest in temporal categories as a rhetorical resource for expressing present-day concerns, why restrict our analyses to narrative representations of the past? Why not extend it to the rhetorical use of the future? As John Berger (1977) wrote, ‘The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act’ (p. 11). This article shows that the future can also be a well of conclusions. In the editors’ discourse on the newspaper’s identity, ‘flashbacks’ as well as ‘flash-forwards’ proved to be rich symbolic resources to draw upon in the conflict over the paper’s new direction. Processes of organizational change and innovation tend to be fuelled by forward-looking rhetoric and nostalgic terms such as mission, vision and planning. Here, organizational actors cast new light on the present by imposing today’s concerns on an imagined future, projecting hopes and aspirations or fears and apprehensions onto it, in fantastic detail or in dry officialize.

One final remark: The notion of ‘invented transition’ to refer to the symbolic construction of historical discontinuities may put discursive and non-discursive acts of change on the analytic radar of organizational history studies (for an exploration of discontinuity talk for identity studies, see Ybema, 2010). Having touched upon only a few possible uses of invented transitions in this article, there is considerable scope for integrative organizational studies that work across fields of historical and ethnographic research. Given the hyperdynamic conditions in contemporary organizations, the notion might prove useful, not only in studies of narratives of change but also in studying artefacts, events and practices as symbolic or ritualistic markers of transformations, as turning
points or new beginnings in organizations, such as the introduction of new work clothes, buildings, office designs, IT solutions and the instigation of change through festivities, speeches, meetings and ceremonies.

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Notes

1. The term ‘invented’ is useful in drawing attention to subjective and political dimensions of history, although it may also be somewhat misleading. Not only does it impute a perhaps overly contrived character to the selective construction of the past, it can also be understood as implying that we are able to tell where ‘authenticity’ ends and ‘invention’ begins. Such a position is untenable. When analysing social phenomena such as traditions or identities it is difficult, if not impossible ‘to discriminate between “genuine” antiques from the fakes’ (Burke, 1986: 317). From a constructivist perspective, the interesting question is how actors ‘invent’ and socially negotiate ‘authenticity’ (or ‘falsehood’) as a legitimate designation of a particular practice, identity or history.

2. Even the disappearance of the newspaper’s Catholic denunciation in the 1960s, commonly presented as a metamorphosis, might be told as a tale of continuance and tradition. As a Catholic union paper, de Volkskrant used to be religiously as well as socially inspired, and this social inspiration remained firmly intact in this period. The paper maintained its loyalty to its main shareholder, the Catholic union (which established close connections with the socialist union), as well as to its social tradition as a newspaper that supported emancipation and pursued social ideals. With its decisively left-wing, progressive character and its connections to the unions and the social-democratic party, it also continued preaching an ideological truth and remained part of a pillar-like societal structure.

References


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