

# Crisis, Credibility and Corporate History

Reviewer:

[Tom Watson](#) (Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK)

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## Article

### **Corporate history – authenticity needs archives and honesty**

Corporate history is an area of scholarship and publishing that has a mixed reputation and is also an activity that is under-represented in management thinking and corporate communication. It can have the ring of authenticity when company leaders allow unfortunate or plain wrong past actions to be written about, alongside the progress and social contribution that the company believes it has made. Or it can be a bland timeline of inexorable progress that is dry and frankly unbelievable.

For those wanting to explore the roles of company history, archives and archivists, guidance on how company histories can be prepared and the historiographical debate, this book of edited chapters from a 2013 conference is a helpful starting point. However, for historians of management, business disciplines and communication, it has valuable case studies on how to negotiate, manage, structure and write successful company histories.

The chapters are the proceedings of the Symposium of the International Council on Archives, Section on Business and Labour Archives which met in Basel, Switzerland. It thus has a European focus, although there is a Japanese case study which will be referred to later. There are five sections, with a total of 12 papers.

The sections are, broadly, an introduction to the historiographical debate; the role of in-house archivists in curating and writing corporate history; the challenges in writing corporate histories; broader approaches to corporate history-telling; and case studies from Roche, IBM and Toyota.

As a practicing communication historian, my interest and that I suspect of many readers will be in the sections and chapters that discuss real-world of negotiations with company leaders who have a quite natural disposition to seek a positive story about their organization in the belief that it will enhance its image. This book is more than a set of best practice guidelines but the "history of some histories" tells "how not to" as well as "how to".

As Jonathan Steffen, in the opening chapter, notes when paraphrasing the English historian E.H. Carr: "History is there for us to learn from our mistake, whatever the nature of those mistakes might have been" (p. 10). It is the companies that choose to overlook their mistakes that turn corporate history into either a process of delusion or reputation damage. It becomes a hagiography, "a hero or martyr epic designed to glorify heroes or saints,

irrespective of how the central characters lived their lives” (Posing, p. 55), with the corporate emphasis on the heroic leader and constant progress. Recently, I read a corporate biography of the founder of a leading international public relations consultancy group. It was well-presented and illustrated; it has value in telling a version of how US public relations groups expanded worldwide from the 1960s onwards but, as it was written by a former staff member of the consultancy, it lacked the sparkle of objectivity and authenticity. The founder of the organization was presented in a heroic manner, not absurdly so but he just never seemed to make an error and was loved by all.

However, Clemens Wischermann’s example of a 1986 corporate history of Daimler-Benz that “ignored the issue of forced labour” (p. 16) in the Nazi era demonstrated how less-than-full disclosure can cause a decade of problems. For although the company and its external historians later produced a study on the use and treatment of forced labourers, Wischermann notes that the initial corporate history was a “PR disaster” and “reflected the social awareness of the German public at the time” (p. 16).

Another German organization, which also prospered from 1933 to 1945, was the Gunther Quandt group which is now best known as an important shareholder in the carmaker, BMW. It chose not to obscure its past and commissioned an academic historian, Joachim Scholtyssek, to write a corporate history from its foundation to 1954. Scholtyssek’s chapter is interesting to read for its summary of the Quandt family’s progress before, during and after Second World War and for the discussion of the ethics of beneficial participation in a regime in your homeland which was corrupt and inhumane, which “gives us food for thought”. It is also valuable as case study on the negotiation of the writing of such histories. Scholtyssek was able to negotiate free access to corporate archives and an assurance that the Quandts would publish the results of his study. They honoured their commitments, “as I was sure they would”, the historian “included [them] in the written agreement” (p. 64).

Not all company history projects are as challenging as these examples, which come from an appalling period in world history, but there are other examples of companies which still contend with disasters from decades ago, such as Hoffman-La Roche’s release of dioxins from its Seveso plant in Italy in 1976. Now known as Roche, its “Historical Collection and Archive is committed to reappraising Seveso” (Jungkind, p. 49), which demonstrates the value of corporate archives in maintaining institutional memory in an accurate and informed manner. On a more positive note, the Danish A.P. Moller-Maersk A/S transport and energy group has a Group Historical Documentation service “which supplies its product into the Group’s communication efforts and as such must support the communication strategy” (Morgen, p. 28).

The final case study comes from carmaker Toyota, which illustrates a different cultural perspective and is this writer’s first reading of the application of a quality assurance (*kaizen*) approach to the preparation of historical material. Toyota followed the *shashi* model, which was developed in the nineteenth century and is essentially a company-written history drawn from its own archives. *Shashi* are published by Japanese companies and distributed to stakeholders as gifts. The Toyota approach, which used the services of its own archivists, was taken forward by an editorial committee of 30 managers from different parts of the organization which met biannually to decide on direction, content and mediums of distribution. After six years of QA-assisted preparation, the history of Toyota’s first 75 years, *75 Years of Toyota: Ever-better Cars*, was launched. It was organized in three timeline chapters and also gave the lineage of every vehicle produced by the company. However, the “Ever-better” cars theme does not appear to cover the millions of cars recalled from 2009 to 2011, which have damaged Toyota’s previous reputation for dependable cars.

Every organization of substance has a history: the writing of corporate history can play an important role in building and defending brands and reputations. However, *Crisis, Credibility and Corporate History* demonstrated that there needs to be both honesty in the expression of that history in order to demonstrate authenticity, as well as investment in archives, archivists and production of historical outputs in print, visual materials and online. The “About” paragraph or two on the corporate web site is not sufficient, as this edited collection demonstrates with variety and accessibility.