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Collective Memory Meets Organizational Identity: Remembering to Forget in a Firm's Rhetorical History*

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Abstract

Much organizational identity research has grappled with the question of identity emergence or change. Yet the question of identity endurance is equally puzzling. Relying primarily on the analysis of 309 internal bulletins produced at a French aeronautics firm over almost fifty years, we theorize a link between collective memory and organizational identity endurance. More specifically, we show how forgetting in a firm's ongoing rhetorical history—here, the bulletins' repeated omission of contradictory elements in the firm's past (i.e., structural omission) or attempts to neutralize them with valued identity cues (i.e., preemptive neutralization)—sustains its identity. Thus knowing "who we are" might depend in part on repeatedly remembering to forget "who we were not."

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Since Albert and Whetten's (1985) foundational piece in which they define organizational identities as the shared beliefs of members about the central, enduring, and distinct characteristics of their organization, much research has focused on the question of identity emergence or change; singular events or junctures that might impact identities have therefore proven sought-out loci of research. Many studies on organizational identities have focused, for instance, on initial formation stages (e.g., Corley and Gioia (2004)), on mergers (e.g., Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas (2010)), on sudden regulatory changes (e.g., Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal, & Hunt (1998)) or on other key disruptive events in the life of organizations (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich (1994)). These studies mostly center on the efforts needed for identities to be created or evolve.

Yet the question of identity endurance is perhaps as puzzling as that of identity emergence or change. The criterion that an organization's defining characteristics are enduring is based on an assumption of relative temporal continuity. A firm might, for instance, be said, across decades, to be "innovative" or "caring of its employees." But how identities actually endure, over extended periods of time, remains empirically poorly understood. Besides a small number of studies (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Tripsas, 2009), most organizational identity research focuses on discrete moments in time or events over limited time-spans (i.e., several years). As Dennis Gioa et al. note, identity endurance remains problematic and more studies are needed to understand "how organizational members work to maintain continuity" (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000: 76).

In this article, we analyze the endurance of a central dimension of an organization's identity over nearly fifty years by conducting an archival analysis of a French aeronautics firm's collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick, 2007; Olick & Levy, 1997), specifically its ongoing

"rhetorical history" or or the process by which managers impose meaning on a firm's past (Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, & Wiebe, 2011: 104). Using a theory elaboration approach (Strauss, 1987: 306-311), we document the interplay between organizational identity and collective memory by showing how repeated forgetting in the firm's rhetorical history helps sustain elements of the organization's identity over time. Repeated forgetting is manifested here in the ongoing deliberate omission of potentially contradictory aspects of the organization's history (i.e., what we label "structural omission") or the ongoing deliberate attempt to neutralize these contradictory aspects with valued identity cues (i.e., "preemptive neutralization").

In recent years, organizational identity and collective memory have, separately, become the subjects of intensive study. Their intersection, however, has been largely ignored. Our study aims to bridge these literatures by documenting how the ongoing historical construction of collective memory relates to an organization's identity. In particular, our study brings attention to the collective memory dimension (specifically forgetting) present in organizational identity work. Moreover, we show that forgetting is as integral to collective memory as remembering. In that sense, the question "who we *are*" might be tightly linked to repeatedly remembering to forget "who we *were* not."

The Neglected Puzzle of Identity Endurance

Following Albert and Whetten's (1985) work, an increasing consensus has emerged among scholars that organizational identities need to be actively claimed (Glynn, 2000). This view probably explains why much organizational identity research has examined moments of organizational emergence or change when most of the claiming is assumed to occur (Corley et al., 2006: 93). In that respect, organizational identity formation moments have proven key areas

of research (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010). In addition, singular events that disrupt established identities have been a common focus of organizational identity research (Brown, 2006; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Fiol, 2002; Fox-Wolfgramm et al., 1998; Gioia et al., 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Examples include studies of how the hiring of professional social workers by a rape-crisis center formerly led by feminist militants changed its identity (Zilber, 2002) or how the merger of two rival organizations can allow for a transitional identity to emerge (Gioia et al., 2010). All these studies center on organizational members' efforts to enact new identities or allow them to evolve at moments of transition.

At the same time, most organizational identity research takes somewhat for granted that identities endure by focusing on the efforts it takes to create or change them, not on what it takes for organizational identities to stay the same. Put otherwise, identity endurance is rarely seen as a puzzle to be explained; it is assumed as relatively unproblematic and remains empirically neglected. Yet staying the same requires efforts and work (Gagliardi, 1986: 124-125). As David Whetten notes, "the enduring definition standard [of identities] does not stipulate that only very old organizational features will be experienced by current members as central and distinguishing features. Rather… organizations are capable of signaling their intent to make recent commitments endure" (Whetten, 2006: 225). How organizations signal their intent over extended periods of time is still poorly understood.

An initial set of answers to the puzzle of identity endurance might come from the identity work literature. Endurance can be seen as an outcome of repeated "identity work" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, &

Kaufmann, 2006; Snow & Leon, 1987; Van Maanen, 1998; Watson, 2008). The more often an identity is (re)enacted, the more strongly stakeholders are likely to experience it, and the more enduring it might prove. Accordingly, previously explored identity work strategies should apply to identity endurance as well (see Ashforth, (2001) and Ashforth et al., (2008) for reviews of these strategies). For instance, affirming positive identity attributes (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Steele, 1988) and making negative comparisons with alternate identities (Angus, 1993; Zilber, 2002, 2009) might help a valued identity to endure. The identity work literature has, however, mainly been theorized at the individual level of analysis, and thus does not provide many pointers to how (collective) organizational identity work might operate. Jumping between levels of analysis is a recurring challenge in much organizational identity research (Corley et al., 2006) and one that applies to the research question we investigate as well.

A more relevant set of answers to the identity endurance puzzle might therefore come from the organizational identity management literature. The identity management literature, with its clear organizational focus, provides clues to how identity work might proceed at the collective level (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2010; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). It has been posited that at the broadest level, organizational cultures enable organizational identity work, and by extension possibly the endurance of organizational identities (Dutton et al., 1994; Hatch, 2005; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). For instance, a wide range of common organizational cultural markers such as artifacts (Appadurai, 1986; Bechky, 2003; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997) and policies or procedures (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Selznick, 1957) provide opportunities for sense creation and can help manage identities.[1] Alongside these common organizational ways to manage identities, moreover, more targeted managerial responses have

[1] Limiting staff turnover rate is, for instance, an example of an organizational policy that might ensure continued identity enactment (Anand, Manz, & Glick, 1998: 809)

also been documented. For example, when dealing with multiple identities, compartmentalization or aggregation (Pratt & Foreman, 2000) offers ways to manage identities and might help them to endure. Though a variety of identity management strategies have been documented, most are set in the present. Identities are rarely, however, only set in the present. They are part of ongoing historical constructions and collective memories. Thus, while our cumulative knowledge of identity work is considerable, its specific relationship to an organization's history, particularly its collective memory, remains neglected.

A main reason to explore this intersection is that the literatures on organizational identity and collective memory share the assumption that imagined communities, whether historical or organizational, bind members together. Imagined communities are communities that are largely constructed by members through *historical* projects as opposed to face-to-face interactions (Anderson, 1991). Imagined communities, such as Irish-Americans in the United States or Armenians worldwide, provide their members with a sense of social belonging and identity. Such communities typically emerge when a community's size, geographic dispersion or lifespan limits the members' ability to engage in the face-to-face construction of group identity. While most research on imagined communities has focused on the nation and ethnic groups, there is increasing recognition that other communities, including economic organizations, are no less imagined and historically constructed than the nation (Jenkins, 2008). For instance, the "Amway spirit" or the "HP [Hewlett-Packard] way" typically transcends the firm's contemporary identity. Examining historical projects that sustain imagined communities can be particularly fruitful in the case of organizations that exist over long periods of time, and possibly provide keys to identity endurance.

Collective Memory and Identity Endurance

Collective memory has been defined as a reconstruction of the past that adapts images of ancient facts to present beliefs (Halbwachs, 1992). It is a historical construction (Olick & Levy, 1997: 922) and, as Lewis Coser notes in his introduction to Maurice Halbwachs' work, it requires repeatedly "imaginatively reenacting a past" (Halbwachs, 1992: 24). Collective memory entails numerous facets, including, for instance, ceremonial activities (Mosse, 1975), incorporated practices (Connerton, 1989), and traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992). Our focus in this article is only on the rhetorical expression of collective memory since this facet is most amenable to historical study. Longitudinal data on ceremonies are, for instance, harder to collect. Collective memory, more broadly, is part of a community's "moral and intellectual framework" (Schwartz, 2000: 8) and confers identity on individuals and groups alike (Halbwachs, 1992). It is an active pursuit that allows mnemonic communities to cohere and adapt (Misztal, 2003; Schwartz, 2000) and has been posited to be "a central, if not the central, medium through which identities are constituted" (Olick & Robbins, 1998: 133). It has even been suggested that without a collective memory communities would likely not persist: a "real community" is "a 'community of memory,' one that does not forget its past" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985: 153). In the same manner that organizational identities can be viewed as socially constructed, collective memories can be seen as historically constructed pursuits (Olick, 2007: 90).

Despite sharing similarities in approaches, collective memory and organizational identity scholars rarely intersect. Empirical research on collective memory has concentrated only on a few social groups, primarily on the family, ethnic and religious groups, and the nation, even though theoretical scholarship has repeatedly identified organizations as important and

understudied mnemonic communities (Zerubavel, 1996). Topical foci that have come to define the field of memory studies include national monuments and the historical trajectories of public figures (for general overviews, see Misztal (2003), Olick (2003), Olick and Robinson (1998)). Yet the collective memory lens applies just as forcefully to organizations, notwithstanding the scant attention they have received to date. Meanwhile organizational analysis has largely overlooked the role of collective memory in its own research agenda (Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010). An influential article by Walsh and Ungson (1991) generated a surge of interest in organizational memory, but this literature has mainly treated memory as a fairly static product rather than a historical construction (Ackerman, 1998; Argote, 1999; Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Huber, 1991; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Walsh, 1995). (For an example of a static approach see Andrea Casey's study (1997) of a substance abuse organization's collective memory.) This line of research has also considered memory work largely uninfluenced by broader historical trajectories and context (Benkhard, 2000). In other words, the notion that "remembering is not an activity that can be bracketed out as either an independent or a dependent variable" but is "both the medium and the outcome of social figurations generally" (Olick, 2007: 118) has been less explored in organizational settings.

Collective memory in particular has been surprisingly missing from the discussion on identity endurance. A first reason for this neglect might be a broader lack of historical awareness in organization studies (Daniel, Arzoglou, & Lamont, Forthcoming; Salaman, 1978; Smith, 1990: 88). Recent calls to study organizations (here, their identities) from a more historical perspective underline this limited awareness (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Ventresca & Mohr, 2002). With regards specifically to organizational identity research, besides a 25-year longitudinal study of a Danish producer of audiovideo systems (Ravasi &

Schultz, 2006) and a 10-year longitudinal study of a digital photography company (Tripsas, 2009), only rarely are extended periods of time considered. Most studies tend to follow cross-sectional designs in which the past is interpreted from a single present point in time, rather than on a longitudinal examination of a potentially shifting history. And the few studies that do not confine their analysis to single points in time tend to encompass a relatively short time span—for instance, two years during a corporate spinoff (Corley & Gioia, 2004) and eight years of an identity formation (Gioia et al., 2010).

A second reason for the neglect of collective memory in organizational identity studies might be that the identity literature remains largely methodologically reliant on simultaneously collected interviews. Rather than a collective memory, such interview data yield a "collected memory" (Rowlinson et al., 2010: 78). Organizational memory is treated as the aggregate of concurrent memories of members of the organization. The studies therefore focus more on individuals' ex-post exploration of the past than the ongoing study of a constructed collective memory. As illustrations, past scholarship has emphasized the importance of considering organizational "biographies" (Kimberly, 1987) or "nostalgia" (Brown & Humphreys, 2002) when analyzing organizations. Yet these and other studies typically rely primarily on a set of individual interviews conducted over a short period of time to study history (for other examples see Biggart (1977), de Holan and Phillips (2004) and Kimberly and Bouchikhi (1995)). In that respect, the observation that "collective memory lacks solid empirical footings" (Glynn, 1997: 147) in organization studies still holds true today. Thus the neglect of collective memory as it related to identity might partly be explained by such methodological choices.

Yet the potential for links between collective memory and identity endurance over extended periods of time appears promising. Emerging research on a firm's "rhetorical history"

or “the process by which managers skillfully impose meaning on a firm’s past” (Foster et al., 2011: 104) points to such potential. Building on work emphasizing human agents’ roles in interpreting and shaping a firm’s past (Brunninge, 2009; Ericson, 2006; Gioia, Corley, & Fabbri, 2002; Holt, 2006), scholars have underlined the possible generative nature of such history. For example, at given moments in time, firm members can use a rhetorical history to legitimize or delegitimize specific strategic options (Brunninge, 2009). Similarly, they can rely on such history to build external competitive advantages (Foster et al., 2011). While these studies have mainly focused on external audiences for identities, paying attention to internal audiences is equally important. Alongside the firm’s external strategic partners (Ericson, 2006) or its consumers (Holt, 2006), internal firm members also constitute key audiences for these histories (Suddaby, Foster, & Quinn-Trank, 2010: 159). Once internal members develop shared understandings about their firm’s history, they might uphold a firm’s identity.

While rhetorical histories are commonly associated with remembering, forgetting also needs consideration. Forgetting is integral to all human systems, including organizations. Far from disrupting “organizational narrative which ceases to be a coherent story” and resulting “in organizational identity loss” (Ciuk & Kostera, 2010: 187), forgetting can prove quite generative and essential to maintaining a particular organizational identity over longer periods of time. As Mary Douglas reminds us, certain things always need to be forgotten for any system to work. “There is no way of paying full attention to everything” (Douglas, 1986: 76). She is not alone in highlighting the necessity to continuously forget: Maurice Halbwachs was among the first to note the affinity between remembering and forgetting—or the “deformation of certain recollections” (Halbwachs cited by Misztal (2003: 113)). In fact, many experimental studies have noted that acts of remembering prompt the forgetting of related materials (Anderson & Bjork,

1994; Anderson & Spellman, 1995; MacLeod & Macrae, 2001). Forgetting in a firm's rhetorical history might therefore prove a key facet of a firm's identity endurance.

SETTING AND TEMPORAL BRACKETING

To understand how organizational identities endure, we study the repeated enactment of a key element of a given organization's identity over nearly fifty years. In particular, we examine how the national identity of Société Nationale d'Études et de Construction de Moteurs d'Aviation (Snecma), France's largest aircraft-engine manufacturer, endures in a context of growing international complexity. By national identity, we mean the shared belief that a given organization helps a nation retain its "grandeur" or what the historian Gabrielle Hecht (1998: 2) calls in her study of the French nuclear industry the country's "radiance." National identities are understood as symbolic constructs that can be disconnected from geographical boundaries (Anderson, 1991; Nora, 1996) and are in large part imagined by organizational members (Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003). In our context, as in Hecht's case, "Frenchness" is associated with technological prowess and sovereignty. This definition of Frenchness is specific to the setting we studied: it is the way Snecma employees appropriate a cultural form that they "share" with others, yet interpret differently (Chartier, 1985: 688).

Snecma was founded in 1945 by the French government through an executive order of General de Gaulle (Danel & Cuny, 1978). On the strength of a solid domestic position thanks in part to the government-backed mandate to increase France's technological prowess, Snecma has become one of the four dominant actors in the global aeronautics industry (both military and civilian) alongside General Electric (GE), Pratt & Whitney, and Rolls-Royce. Intermittently in its more than 50-year history, Snecma has experienced extended periods of foreign involvement that

have been essential to its survival.[2] While the collaborations helped Snecma sustain its technological leadership, some Snecma employees also saw them as a dependency that could undermine the firm's leadership. Exploring how the firm has handled these potential challenges to the continuity of its national identity offers a window into the interplay between collective memory and organizational identity.

Our analysis focuses on two distinct periods in Snecma's history. This temporal bracketing strategy allows us to constitute comparable units of analysis for the exploration and replication of theoretical ideas (Langlay, 1999: 703-704). The company's first substantial encounter with a foreign presence occurred in 1945–1970, the post-World War II era following its founding in 1945, when German engineers played a crucial role in rebuilding the French aeronautics industry and specifically in developing Snecma's expertise in military airplane engines, most notably the ATAR engine. The second substantial encounter spanned the 1970–2000 period when Snecma and GE collaborated heavily on a family of civilian aircraft engines, particularly the CFM56 engine (Hedden, 2004; United States General Accounting Office, 1994). Though Snecma has engaged in other foreign collaborations, the two collaborations discussed here are the most extensive and salient in terms of outcomes and level of involvement. (The firm's other collaborations were mere licensing agreements or were less commercially important than the collaborations selected for analysis.) For a summary of Snecma's major foreign collaborations, see Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here: Snecma's Main Foreign Collaborations, 1945–2000

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[2] In 2005 Snecma became part of a larger French industrial conglomerate.

DATA AND METHODS

The idea for this study originated from a set of interviews conducted by one of the co-authors for a separate project with Snecma aeronautics retirees. During the interviews, comments about various aspects of the French aeronautics industry's nationalism and history kept consistently reappearing. The persistence of these themes over generations of employees surprised us, especially in light of the highly international character of the contemporary aeronautics industry, and triggered our interest in the question of identity endurance; leading us to design a theory elaboration exercise in which we use past literature on identity endurance as a "springboard" for laying out potential new lines of research and for directing our data collection "in service of discovering" a new and hopefully more encompassing theory (Strauss, 1987: 306).

We gathered data from three types of sources for our study: (a) archived company internal bulletins, (b) transcribed interviews with Snecma retirees, and (c) other archived Snecma materials held at the French national library, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Our primary data sources were company internal bulletins, titled *Snecma Informations*, held by The Musée de l'Air et de l'Espace, an aeronautics museum. Such bulletins are by no means the sole source of shared organizational identity, but they do represent a coherent and sustained effort on the part of Snecma's leadership to fashion a shared discourse for its members. The bulletins are crucial symbolic devices capturing a constructed identity (Pratt, 2003); they act as organizational artifacts providing meaning for members and reinforcing social identity (Bechky, 2003). They also exemplify the type of print media that Benedict Anderson (1991) identified as instrumental in creating an imagined community, namely media that allow for a shared sense of belonging for multiple generations of community members. These bulletins therefore constitute a form of

collective memory: one that moves beyond a strictly methodologically individualist approach to memory (Rowlinson et al. 2010).

Moreover, the bulletins constitute a unique source of systematic data that is consistently available for the unusually long period that our study encompasses (close to 50 years). The bulletins were written over the years by a succession of more than a dozen different editors and approved by Snecma's top management. Published several times a year and disseminated to all employees, the bulletins reported on Snecma's industrial activities, new technical projects, air shows, and company developments, and provided practical information on housing, health coverage, promotions, and the like. Bulletins published between 1953 and 1982 are typically around 8 pages long; by the mid-1980s, the number of pages rises to 20 or more. From 1953 to 1999 Snecma produced 347 company-wide bulletins, the vast majority of which (89 percent) are conserved at the museum (only 38 are missing). We analyzed all 309 available bulletins.

Second, we relied on interviews of 70 retirees (representing a variety of functions) who worked at Snecma from the 1970s to the 1990s. The interview protocol, initially designed to elicit data on the meaning of work was sufficiently open to allow interviewees to discuss others topics, including Snecma's history. The interview sample was first constructed as a snowball sample and grew through direct mail solicitation. It included representatives from all main occupational groups present at Snecma (e.g., factory workers, engineers, managers). A formal call for interviews with retirees was published in Snecma's main factory newsletter and individual letters requesting interviews were then sent out to 650 randomly selected retirees. Because we did not rely on theoretical sampling (e.g., selecting a set of interviews collected longitudinally over a 50-year period rather than simultaneously), we treat the interview data only as secondary sources. With the interviewees' consent, interviews were tape recorded and

transcribed. When informants declined to be taped, extensive notes were taken. The interview protocol contained, in particular, the following questions: What did your work entail? Whom did you work with? Can you tell me about Snecma's history? Am I missing out on important issues? If so, could you describe them?

Third, we reviewed all 71 publicly available Snecma-related print publications—such as company, labor council (an elected employee body), and employee documents—by searching the indexed files of the French national library using Snecma as a keyword. (French publishers are legally required to deposit at the library all of their publications.) The publications, totaling 2,768 pages dated 1949 to 2007, ranged from a stand-alone company leaflet to more consequent studies of Snecma's main union or engines. This supplementary archive was mainly produced by Snecma employees or close observers and as such reflects their perception over time of the official organizational identity. Like in past historical research, we combined sources to contextualize the primary data and uncover key meaning structures (Gioia et al., 2010; Rao, 1998; Weber, Heinze, & deSoucey, 2008).

Our analysis centers on one enduring aspect of an organization's identity (its national element) from the main vantage point of one key source of organizational identity (the projected official identity conveyed via internal bulletins). We have focused on the national element of Snecma's identity because the interviewees repeatedly and consistently emphasized this dimension during the interviews. It was through the triangulation of our primary data (the bulletins) and the two additional sources (interviews and public archival documents) that we inductively identified the two foreign collaborations (with German engineers and with GE) as crucial events relating to national concerns. With an eye towards theory elaboration and focusing on Snecma's national identity, we systematically read the entire set of bulletins and identified all

references to the German engineers and the GE collaboration. Such references took the form, for instance, of progress reports on joint projects and narratives about joint Snecma-GE industrial activities. (There were, however, many references to the outcomes of the collaboration, for instance description of the CFM56 engines that did *not* mention the American or German input.)

We then engaged in a broader analysis of the bulletins that entailed generalizing from specific accounts to broader themes through iterative coding of the bulletins. We initially identified broad themes by reading randomly selected bulletins to identify the main topics covered. We then used these topics (such as military engines) as coding categories. When new topics emerged (such as Concorde-related activities, beginning in 1963), new categories were added. We then consolidated the categories into broader ones while also keeping close track of coverage of the key foreign collaborations. The final list of main categories included (1) internal affairs, such as promotions, benefits, and the like; (2) industry overviews, such as discussions of markets, general competition, industry trends, and air shows; (3) Germans-related activities, more specifically coverage of the ATAR engine, but *without mention of the collaboration*; (4) German collaboration coverage; (5) GE-related activities, including coverage of the CFM56, CF6, GE36, and GE90 engines but *without mention* of the collaboration; (6) GE collaboration coverage; (7) other Snecma industrial activities activities, including coverage of all military engines, Concorde activities, space-related activities, nuclear activities, and other activities like maintenance; and (8) new technologies not yet assigned to a specific engine. In addition, when foreign collaborations were discussed (namely in categories 4 and 6), we noted whether elements of Snecma's national identity were simultaneously addressed.

Since we did not directly collect these data, the content of each bulletin was independently analyzed by two coders fluent in French. (The initial inter-coder reliability rate

was 86 percent; remaining disagreements were resolved through discussion.) To assess the relative salience of each category, and by extension to understand the mix of coverage at Snecma over the years and its constructed collective memory, we calculated the number of pages devoted to each category in all 309 bulletins. The decision to quantify qualitative data was partly driven by the volume of our data (Pratt, 2009: 858). For any given year, the percentage of coverage devoted to a given category was calculated as the number of pages devoted to it divided by the total number of pages published that year. (In 1974, for instance, out of a total of 80 published pages, 6.25 pages were devoted to GE-related activities. Thus GE-related activities accounted for 7.8 percent of coverage that year.) Finally, we returned to the interviews and other archives to identify any references to France and foreign collaborations to contextualize the bulletin's content.

Insert Table 1 about here: Bulletins' Main Content Areas, 1953-1999

We begin our analysis by describing the origins of Snecma's national identity and its endurance over time. Second, we document the two major foreign components of this endeavor and the challenges they raise to Snecma's national identity. Third, we describe the threat of identity contradictions arising from these collaborations. Fourth, we analyze the collective memory of these foreign involvements, focusing on the ongoing strategies in the firm's rhetorical history devised to make sense of these contradictions. More specifically, we show how Snecma's official history structurally omits potentially contradictory aspects of the firm's past or attempts to preemptively neutralize them with cues of the national identity. In both cases of foreign collaboration, national identity endurance in part proceeds through repeated forgetting in the

firm's ongoing rhetorical history. Thus the firm's collective memory offers a venue for engaging in organizational identity work. Finally, we discuss the study's implications for organizational identity and collective memory research.

SNECMA'S ENDURING NATIONAL IDENTITY

The importance of national identity for Snecma has roots in the organization's unique genesis. The main entity integrated into Snecma at its inception, Gnome et Rhône, was one of only two French firms (along with the automotive manufacturer Renault) subject in 1944–1945 to explicitly "patriotic" post-war nationalizations, or, as historians have labeled them, "sanction-nationalizations," for "unpatriotic" behavior during World War II, essentially working too closely with the German occupants (Audrieu, 1987: 252; Hamdouch, 1989: 19). Snecma's origins thus saddled it with a high onus of proof of patriotism. General de Gaulle made this clear when he created Snecma in his capacity as chairman of the Provisional Government of the French Republic by stating: "The patriotic consciousness necessitates a complete reorganization of the company [Gnome et Rhône, the precursor to Snecma]" (Journal Officiel de la République Française, 1945) (this and all subsequent translations from French are by the authors).

Over nearly fifty years, multiple sources suggest that Snecma's identity has remained rooted in a national discourse. Historically, the French aeronautics industry has been entwined in the nation's ongoing pursuit of global technological leadership. As a state-owned company from 1945 to 2005, Snecma was central to this pursuit. Like in the nuclear industry, firms involved in the aeronautics industry were expected to demonstrate their "Frenchness" through their technological prowess, and their technological prowess came, by the same token, to define and reinforce "Frenchness" (Callon, 2009; Hecht, 1998: 40). A close observer of the aeronautics

industry explains, it is “a tradition in France, since the origins of aviation, that the needs of the country are served by a national aeronautics industry” (Carlier, 1986: 1). The desire for such a capability was also coupled, however, with a goal of global leadership.

By the late 1950s, some French citizens resented the preeminence that the United States was slowly gaining in many sectors, including the aeronautics industry (Hecht, 1998: 39-40; Kuisel, 1997). Snecma’s central Labor Council members, for instance, wrote in 1959 about what they called the “crisis of French aeronautics and its dramatic consequences at Snecma” (Snecma, 1959). The Labor Council charged that the government was investing too little in the industry and that a foreign nation (the United States), via NATO, had “limited” France’s aeronautics potential. Again in 1960, Snecma’s Labor Council warned of a “nefarious agreement” with the United States that rendered most French aeronautics firms “more or less under the control of the American corporations” (Snecma, 1960: 1). By 1973 the Labor Council’s warnings had become even more precise: Snecma should not become “a subcontractor to GE” (Snecma, 1973: 2). An unequal cooperation with GE in which Snecma played second fiddle directly challenged Snecma’s national identity.

Snecma was not the sole organization entrusted with the task of developing “French” capabilities in the aeronautics industry, but with respect to plane engines it largely inherited that task alone after World War II. Thus the understanding that Snecma had originated as part of a national endeavor was central to its identity (Carlier, 1997a; Chilin & Mullié, 2000; Rozenblatt, 1989). As industry observers point out, the creation of Snecma served in part to fulfill two agendas on which there was widespread agreement: an ideological one (the importance of developing a national industry) and a technical-economic one (the ability to manufacture efficient civilian and military engines) (Rozenblatt, 1989). As a company that was state-owned

for most of its history, founded by a government decree, and associated with the national defense industry, Snecma was emblematic of this broader national ideological agenda. In one of Snecma's earliest annual reports, dated 1956, a presentation on the company's prevailing status began with a comparative table of manufacturers organized by national affiliation (United States, United Kingdom, France, and Canada), number of employees, and square feet of installed plant capacity, thus emphasizing national rivalries. The report reassured readers that Snecma possessed "a fully autonomous and path-breaking technology allowing it to be counted among the leading engine manufacturers in the world" (Snecma, 1956: 18-19). Such patriotic claims still permeated Snecma as recently as the mid-1980s: in a 1986 speech to a mixed civilian and military audience, a Snecma representative asserted that Snecma had fulfilled the mission assigned to it in 1945, namely to "reposition France in the arena of aeronautics engines" (Bodemer, 1986: 117).

The post-World War II national aspirations currently prevail. Though the contemporary aeronautics industry, and specifically the manufacture of plane engines, is among the most global of industries (sellers are concentrated, products are fairly standardized, and many customers purchase across borders), nations still compare themselves to each other (Greenberg, Grunberg, Moore, & Sikora, 2010). Recently, for instance, members of the French National Assembly called for a commission to debate the closure of an aeronautics plant in part to protect the country's "capabilities and world rank, as well as its development potential" (French National Assembly, proposal n° 2608, October 19, 2005). Because the development of new aircrafts and engines is an extremely costly and economically risky enterprise, it can no longer however be pursued under the aegis of individual manufacturers. Thus joint ventures, strategic alliances, and government-approved mergers that often transcend national borders have come to dominate the

aeronautics industry. But the fear of losing national leadership continues to shape the identity of organizations in the industry, especially in the case of France, given the close link between technological prowess and French national identity (Hecht, 1998).

A vast majority of the Snecma interviewees spoke about the need to maintain France's leadership when asked to describe the firm's history. As one interviewee typically noted, "In the 1960s in France, no firm was able to build needed tools for the aeronautics pursuit. We were forerunners. Only the Americans could make similar claims." National comparisons were integral to the remembered history. Similarly, another interviewee recalled that during the 1950s, space conquest was an "adventure in which a select group of countries were trying to fly the best engines." He added, "Snecma's success was France's success." Overall, the combined sources suggest that Snecma's national identity was inherited at the organization's birth, reiterated over time, and internalized by several employees. The "patriotic consciousness" that justified Snecma's creation in 1945 proved a fairly enduring element of the firm's organizational identity.

SNECMA'S UNEASY RELIANCE ON FOREIGN EXPERTISE

What General de Gaulle did not mention in 1945 was that France at the time lacked the expertise to build the plane engines that its military wanted: creating inconsistencies and tensions between Snecma's identity and its actual technological prowess. De Gaulle's administration therefore sought the cooperation of a leading German aeronautics engineer, Herman Oestrich, former technical chief of the turbojet program at Bayerische Motoren Werke (BMW) to enhance the firm's technological expertise. Similarly, starting in the 1970s, another foreign collaboration proved crucial to the development of Snecma's expertise. By cooperating with the American firm GE, Snecma successfully positioned itself as a leading manufacturer of civilian engines.

While the German and GE collaborations were instrumental in developing a national aeronautics capability, they also were direct reminders of the limits of Snecma's technological leadership.

Snecma's first major reliance on foreign expertise occurred right after World War II when the French government hired 120 German and Austrian technicians and engineers (commonly referred to as German engineers) to jump-start the French aeronautics industry (Lamouche, 1999: 138). The German engineers were headed by Oestrich, whose attainments included development of the engine that powered Germany's plane credited with contributing to France's initial defeat during World War II (Bodemer & Laugier, 1996). France was not alone in recruiting German engineers into its national industries. Many other countries, including the United States and the U.S.S.R also recruited German scientists (Carlier, 1997a: 11-16; Hunt, 1991). Though courted by the British and Americans, Oestrich opted to develop a turbojet engine for the French. The new engine was initially developed in French-occupied Germany, but the French government soon decided to bring his team to France in a 90-percent subsidiary of Snecma located in small town in central France called Decize. By 1954, Snecma's management transferred the German engineers from relative confinement in Decize and integrated them into the Snecma plant at Villaroche.

Compared to other German workers brought to France after the war, the distinctiveness of the Oestrich group lay in its size and its impact on Snecma (Bohnekamp, 2002: 40-41). The German engineers almost single-handedly positioned Snecma as a crucial supplier to the French Air Force. By 1948, on the strength of German expertise, Snecma produced a turbojet engine known as ATAR. The engine was somewhat deceivingly named for the Ateliers Aéronautique de Rickenbach (ATAR), the town in French-occupied Germany where Oestrich and his team had worked before coming to France. The design of the ATAR engine, however, could be traced

directly to the Berlin BMW plant where Oestrich's group had originated. Moreover, the Villaroche plant in which the German engineers ended up working gradually became one of Snecma's largest, employing close to half its workforce. The engineers played a key role in the development at Snecma of "French" expertise on military airplane engines. Thus Snecma's professional strength in turbojet engines relied initially on German expertise.

In 1969, Snecma again relied heavily on foreign expertise when it began collaborating with GE to produce civilian engines. By the early 1970s, the collaboration produced the first of a successful line of civilian engines, the CFM56. In 1972 an improved version, the CFM56-2, was launched by a 50/50 joint partnership known as CFM International. The assembly of CFM56 engines took place at Snecma using pre-assembled elements arriving from GE plants based in the United States. GE contributed its expertise in the development and manufacture of the core engine, namely the turbine or the most complex part of the engine, also known as its "hot" or "noble" part (Anteby, 2008: 54). By contrast, Snecma essentially contributed its know-how on the engine's "cold" components, the fan and the low engine-compressor, and its noise-reduction expertise (Bernard & Raffy, 1975). Overall, Snecma controlled only 27 percent of the total value of the engine; GE controlled most of the remaining value, with some marginal control assigned to a German manufacturer. This distribution of control was based on "the manufacturing experience of each partner," a tacit acknowledgement of GE's superior experience on that engine (*Snecma Informations*. February 1973, 192: 6). Moreover, when briefly, the GE cooperation seemed in jeopardy; Snecma deemed the situation "alarming," not only for the project, but also for Snecma's own future (*Snecma Informations*. November 1972, 189: 6). Snecma crucially needed the technologies developed by GE. This situation echoed what Snecma had experienced

after World War II when Germans engineers controlled the initial technology for the ATAR's hot components.

GE gradually became a crucial partner/competitor for Snecma in the international civilian aeronautics market between 1970 and 2000. By 2000, the CFM56, produced by both companies, had captured close to 70 percent of the primary market for civilian plane engines in the 18,000–45,000-pound thrust category (the main segment for civilian engines as of 2000). This engine dominated the market for civilian engines in its category for several decades, and Snecma and GE shared in its success. By 2006, civilian engines represented 78 percent of Snecma revenues (Snecma, Rapport d'Activité, 2006). One rare public indicator of Snecma's dependence on GE-related activities is the fact that, by Snecma's own estimates, 34 percent of its revenues in 2004 flowed from GE-related collaborations (Snecma, 2004: 34). As in Snecma's early years, foreign components (this time not in terms of workforce but in terms of material parts and know-how) were contributing significantly to Snecma's success.

THE THREAT OF DENTITY CONTRADICTIONS

While foreign collaborations were occasionally depicted as evidence of France's technological prowess (Chilin, 2000a: 130), more often they were seen as conflicting with Snecma's national identity or leading to what scholars have labeled "contradictions" within and between social systems (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Creed & Seo, 2002). "Frenchness" was assumed to come only from "within," not from external imports (Boorstin, 1989: xvi). (See Hecht (1998: 328-329) and Djelic (1998) for similar perceptions of foreign collaboration in other industries.) In an acknowledgment of this contradiction with reference to another foreign partnership, the company-wide bulletin noted: "We signed an agreement . . . now more than a year ago. A lot has

been said. While some put forward the technical and commercial advantages of such an association, others saw it as a regrettable intrusion of a foreign firm in our activities" (*Snecma Informations*. December 1975, 221: 3). Besides being seen as "intrusions," the foreign collaborations could also suggest a technical inferiority that challenged Snecma's national identity.

The French government hired the German engineers partly because it viewed the French Air Force, and the French aeronautics industry, as inferior compared to the forces of its enemies and allies during World War II (Fridenson & Lecuir, 1969; Vivier, 1997). Thus the presence of the German engineers at Snecma underlined the French aeronautics industry's limitations. The fact that these hires were former enemies exacerbated the uneasiness about the collaboration. When the German engineers first relocated to France, Snecma's management brought in a prominent national political leader to deliver a speech to Decize residents asserting that "those who criticized the arrival of Germans at Decize can only be collaborators" (Carlier, 1997b). Snecma's national project justified tolerating the presence of former enemies whose work served the project; it was the critics of this arrangement who were labeled unpatriotic. This speech depicted the foreign collaboration as a possible answer to Snecma's technical inferiority, but also revealed Snecma's limited capabilities, and by extension, its fragile national identity.

Similarly, the GE collaboration proved partly contradictory with Snecma's national identity. The collaboration was officially depicted as "recognition by GE of the value of being associated with Snecma and of our technical and industrial capabilities" (*Snecma Informations*. February 1990, 317: 3). But the need to maintain an independent national aeronautics capability was voiced as soon as the cooperation started (Snecma, 1970: 2). Some observers also noted that GE was more interested in the financial investments that the French state-owned company could

promise upfront, and in the possibility of export to Europe, than it was in Snecma's technical expertise (Comité pour l'Histoire de l'Aéronautique, 2003: 76). Moreover, the U.S. administration refused at first to allow export of GE's core engine technology to Snecma (Bonnet, 1996: 63)—suggesting that it perceived Snecma's technology as less advanced.

When the CFM56 collaboration was officially launched in 1971, Snecma's president warned employees that "we should not show ourselves inferior" to General Electric (*Snecma Informations*. December 1971, Supplement). Implicitly, such inferiority would tarnish Snecma's national identity. Thus Snecma bulletins almost always characterized the dynamics of the relationship between Snecma and GE in terms of equality. Proclamations of a "partnership of equals" date to the early days of the CFM56 (for examples, see *Snecma Informations*. March 1974, 203: 1; June 1974, 206: 1; and July-August 1974, 207: 1). But suspicions of a sell-out to GE occasionally surfaced, signaling uneasiness regarding the collaboration on the part of the French. Snecma's technical director was asked, for instance, in a 1985 public colloquium if Snecma's relatively small size, the siting of CFM headquarters in the United States, and the distribution of production tasks signaled "control of Snecma by GE." His answer, and the official stance consistently conveyed in the bulletins, reaffirmed that the partnership was a "50/50 collaboration" (Lachaume, 1986: 205). The claims of equality underlined the unease triggered by the GE collaboration among Snecma members. The next sections describe how—in light of these foreign involvements—through structural omissions of Snecma's past and attempts to preemptively neutralize contradictory elements of the past with national cues, the firm's collective memory helped sustain the firm's national identity.

STRUCTURAL OMISSION

The opportunity to revisit Snecma's past provided at each publication of Snecma's internal bulletins points to repeated omissions of major foreign collaborations from the historical record, and, by extension, from the firm's collective memory. The content analysis of the bulletins presented in Figure 2 shows that the firm's two most significant foreign collaborations (the German and GE collaborations) did take up a considerable share of the bulletin's coverage in the relevant time periods. However, they were overwhelmingly discussed *without* explicitly mentioning that these were foreign collaborations. In essence, the roles of the German engineers and GE in Snecma's industrial activities were routinely forgotten. Contradictory elements of Snecma's past were mainly left out from the firm's ongoing rhetorical history.

Insert Figure 2 about here: Bulletins' Coverage of Snecma Industrial Activity, 1953-1999

Such structural omission is particularly evident with respect to the German engineers. While the history of Franco-German collaboration was common knowledge among Snecma employees and retirees, the internal bulletins provide sparse coverage of that past. As Table 2 indicates, of the 5,622 pages of bulletins we analyzed, fewer than five (0.1%) explicitly mention the German contingent. A photograph of Oestrich—an identifiably Germanic name—with the byline "Director of the Technical Group in Charge of Turbo Engines" appeared in the first company-wide Snecma bulletin in 1953 alongside portraits of fourteen other executives (*Snecma Informations*. October 1953, 1: 8–9). At Oestrich's retirement in 1960, an internal memorandum signed by Snecma's director praised his "leadership," "remarkable technical abilities," and his contributions to "the difficult Franco-German collaboration." At his death a moving tribute, including an account of his early trajectory in Germany, appeared in a bulletin (*Snecma*

Informations. June 1973, 194: 1). But apart from these sporadic references, the German collaboration left little trace in the bulletins.

Insert Table 2 about here: Bulletins' Content Distribution, 1953-1999

Additional sources also suggest the extent of the German engineers' structural omission in the company's rhetorical history. A former Snecma union representative wrote about what he saw as Snecma's management general "more or less conscious desire to 'erase' the German presence responsible for the ATAR [engine]" from Snecma's collective memory (Chilin, 2000b: 84). An illustration of such omission occurred in the early 1980s at the retirement ceremony of a French engineer, who had worked closely with the Germans in Decize, and, then, at Villaroche. At his retirement ceremony, his supervisor made a speech underlining the fact that the retiree had entered the industry as a "mere draftsman." The retiree was, however, a graduate from a German aeronautics engineering school that he attended during World War II after being taken by the Germans. His supervisor was aware of this. Both his supervisor and he preferred to omit the German element of his past. Similar omission also occurred in more contemporary times. For instance, in late 1999, when Snecma Villaroche's plant director wished employees a happy new year, he reminded them that years earlier Villaroche had employed the pioneers of modern aeronautics: "For fifty years all the plane engines that contributed and still continue to contribute to the fame of Snecma were born at Villaroche." The plant's accomplishments, he added, made it a "jewel of the French and European aeronautics industry" (*Trait d'Union, Bulletin d'Information Snecma Villaroche*. December 19, 1999: 1). Technically, the director's phrasing was correct: all the plane engines that had contributed to Snecma's success in the previous *fifty*

years (since 1949) had been "born" at Villaroche. But Snecma's greatest initial success, the ATAR engine, was conceived in Berlin, then Rickenbach, and finally Decize (in 1948), *not* at Villaroche; Thus one of the most consequential births had occurred elsewhere and involved a contingent of German engineers as midwives—a seemingly small omitted detail.

For the GE collaboration starting in the 1970s, the physical distance to the American teams working on the CFM line of engines de-facto helped downplay the extent of the foreign involvement, yet physical distance was not enough; structural omission again proved apparent in the treatment of the collaboration. A systematic examination of references to GE in Snecma's internal bulletins at a time when Snecma and GE were collaborating heavily (on the CFM56 and later on the GE90), reveals a familiar pattern of narrative omissions. While close to 300 pages of *Snecma Informations* (292 or 5.2%) were devoted to GE-related activities, only a small number of pages (18 or 0.3%) touched specifically on the GE collaboration, providing, for instance, details on GE's work on the same engines in the United States (see Table 2). Few articles on the CFM56 mentioned GE's collaborative work in Cincinnati and at other U.S. GE plants, thus suggesting structural omission in Snecma's collective memory. This partial coverage is in keeping with the narrative strategy that Snecma engaged in over the years: the proper way to discuss the collaboration was to focus on its national (French) component. An article on the first orders for the CFM56-3 (an updated version of the CFM56 engine) is typical of the coverage of the collaboration provided in the internal bulletins. Under the title, "First Orders for the CFM56-3: the model of the engine delivered to Boeing," the bulletin notes that U.S. airlines such as Southwest Airlines and USAir purchased the engines and explains in detail the role the main Snecma plant played in making these models. Only a brief footnote reminds readers that the engine "as we all know," is developed with GE (*Snecma Informations*, Sept-October 1981: 272).

(See Table 1 for other representative excerpts.) The structural omission of collaborations involving the Germans engineers or GE from Snecma's collective memory helped affirm Snecma's national identity.

Added archival sources and interviews also point to similar structural omission. For instance, a chronology of Snecma's Villaroche plant spanning from World War II to 1995 does not once mention GE (Lamouche, 1999: 200-208). In the interviews, some retirees did bring up the GE collaboration when discussing personal work interactions. Many engineers and executives, in particular, had worked closely at some point in their career with GE counterparts. They often described the benefits they derived from those close relationships. As an example, a retiree recalled that when he visited GE facilities, he noticed "large machines, like X-Ray machines, that permitted to look inside engines: we gradually adopted the same." Likewise, another retiree remarked that "Snecma started buying parts from GE that proved vital to the engine's development." Prior to that, he did not realize how "vital" they were to building engines. Yet when asked about Snecma's history, retirees tended to focus on activities and development occurring in France, with few mentions of U.S. based activities. The use of wording suggesting that Snecma (alone) "built" or "sold" engines was the norm. In all but four interviews, interviewees stated with no reference to GE that Snecma manufactured the CFM56 engine.

PREEMPTIVE NEUTRALIZATION

When not structurally omitting the past, attempts to preemptively neutralize the foreign collaborations with national cues was the common way to discuss these episodes in the firm's rhetorical history. This preemptive neutralization helped to dilute the memory of foreign

presences at the company and created the conditions for subsequent forgetting. In doing so, Snecma was also again upholding its national identity. The bulletins' treatment of Snecma's German engineers exemplifies such preemptive neutralization. The aforementioned limited references to the German presence in the internal bulletins were almost always coupled with the reinforcement of French patriotic claims. As an illustration, while it was the norm, at the time, to offer citizenship as part of the strategic transfer, not all Germans opted for citizenship (Bodemer and Laugier 1996). Oestrich's 1973 obituary in the Snecma bulletin ends by dully noting that he took French citizenship in 1948. The customary way to refer to Oestrich and the German engineers was to acknowledge their achievements and simultaneously to stress their acquired French patriotism. A typical internal bulletin, for instance, describes the arrival of the German engineers and immediately adds that the collaboration was undertaken "at the request and with the help" of the French government (*Snecma Informations.* December 1975, 221: 3), thus stressing its patriotic context.

The ongoing need to preemptively neutralize any perceived contradiction with Snecma's national identity by coupling the German past with patriotic cues is also captured in other archival sources. As an example, a 1996 history of Snecma by two former employees stresses that Oestrich "opted for French citizenship" (Bodemer & Laugier, 1996). Likewise, another employee noted that Oestrich was a "naturalized" French citizen and was buried in France (Dodanthun, 1987: 39). In addition, a speech delivered at Snecma in 1995 by a German former colleague of Oestrich's who had by then returned to Germany illustrates such attempts at neutralizing perceived contradiction. After praising Snecma's achievements in "spearheading" European collaborations, he added: "My [German] colleagues and I are clearly emotionally involved with France; for proof, half of us stayed in this country [France]. The others, including

myself, are always happy to come back here." (Von Gersdorff, 1996). This expression of patriotic allegiance conveys how Snecma members—even Germans—adopted the acceptable way to cast the German involvement: by emphasizing their allegiance to France. Such preemptive neutralizing acts might seem singular and historically contingent (due to Germany's former enemy status), but they also appear in the historical recollection of the GE collaboration.

The official justification for collaborating with GE was initially presented in pragmatic terms: international cooperation was deemed "nowadays necessary to launch new projects" in the civilian market (*Snecma Informations*. July 1972, 186: 3). But the collaboration was also framed in the context of a broader national endeavor. In 1974, for instance, Snecma reminded its employees that the 10-ton engine (the CFM56) was a priority for the VIth National Development Plan drawn up by the French government (*Snecma Informations*. July-August 1974, 207: 2-3). Thus the collaboration with GE was to some extent also branded a patriotic endeavor, echoing Snecma's earlier depiction of its reliance on German engineers. While the bulletins described Snecma's agreement with GE as a way to "compete in collaboration and in close intelligence with our General Electric friends" (*Snecma Informations*. June 1981, 271: 8), the collaboration with GE still needed to be justified. The bulletin reminded its readers that the collaboration was "requested and supported by the French government," phrasing that deemphasized Snecma's active role in bringing about the collaboration (*Snecma Informations*. November 1979, 258: 1). Overall, more than half of the 18 pages in the bulletins specifically discussing the GE collaboration provided the readers with some reminder of the "patriotic" rationale for working with Americans (see Table 2). The rationales included collaborating at the request of the French government and/or to develop a national aeronautics capability.

The interviews transcriptions and supplemental archives also contained instances of similar preemptive neutralization. As an illustration, an interviewee typically explained, “One should not forget that the Caravelle [a French plane] did not previously have a French engine. Here, we don’t have a 100 percent French engine, but for the first time, at least with GE we aren’t playing second fiddle. We are in the game.” Another interviewee added, “While we might dream of doing everything on our own, the fact is that we cannot. Being with GE allows us to still be global leaders in engine manufacturing and that’s what’s important for Snecma.” A different interviewee clarified, “We had to work with GE to maintain our lead. This was necessary for France.” These quotes suggest that working with GE in the national interest (rather than stressing an economic rationale) was the proper way to discuss the collaboration

Supplemental archives also tended to present and justify the GE collaboration with patriotic rationales. The joint-manufacture of the CFM56 engine with GE needed to proceed in the “national interest” and for the “survival of the French aeronautics industry” (Snecma, 1973: 2). Even years into the collaboration, preemptively neutralizing GE’s presence was often required. In the late 1980s, for instance, another Snecma employee justified working with GE to allow the French firm to become “the third engine manufacturer in the occidental world” (Dodanthun, 1987: 53). In 2000, a different Snecma employee also explained that the activities derived from collaborating with GE were a “consecration of Snecma’s industrial capability” (Chilin, 2000a: 133), bolstering France’s technological prowess. Put otherwise, across data sources, elements of the firm’s national identity routinely appeared in the narratives directly discussing consequential foreign collaborations. Thus the firm’s collective memory preemptively neutralized contradictory elements of the past.

DISCUSSION

Our study documents the ongoing creation of a firm's unique rhetorical history by a different cast of characters (the successive bulletin editors) over nearly fifty years. Two distinct periods in Snecma's history characterized by crucial collaboration with foreign partners gave rise to the ongoing construction of this history. To sustain the national element of its identity, Snecma relied first on German expertise and later on collaboration with GE. Yet both foreign collaborations had the potential to create contradiction with the national underpinnings of Snecma's identity. Snecma's rhetorical history repeatedly omitted elements in the firm's past deemed "troubling" from its record (Horwitz, 1998; Wallace, 1996). Moreover, the rhetorical history continually attempted to preemptively neutralize these contradictory elements of the past with national identity cues. In other words, it called for invoking patriotism when potentially unpatriotic behavior was suspected. Combined, these strategies successfully upheld Snecma's collective memory, which partly allowed the firm to maintain its national identity.

While we cannot entirely rule out that Snecma's national identity did not change over time (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Glynn, 2000), it appeared to remain fairly enduring and no data source suggests that it evolved, for instance, into a new interdependent identity. Thus the study's findings shed light on the interplay of collective memory and organizational identity endurance. They show how a valued element of a firm's identity (here, its national identity) was sustained in the firm's collective memory (here, its internal bulletins) via repeated forgetting in its rhetorical history. The study also highlights the importance of forgetting, not only remembering, in collective memory processes. Repeated forgetting constitutes one link between collective memory and organizational identity endurance. Our findings provide an explanation of how an organizational identity can endure.

Implications for Organizational Identity Research

Our study first makes salient how organizational identities' apparent durability might prove more than merely "illusory"(Gioia et al., 2000: 64). Identities might be rendered enduring via collective memory, particularly through repeated forgetting and remembering. Our study therefore highlights both the collective and historical dimensions of identity work. While identity work has been mainly theorized at the individual level, it also operates at the organizational level. Alongside previously noted collective identity management strategies (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2010; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), our study's findings make clear that the making of a collective memory is a form of collective identity work. Moreover, we already know that individual identity narratives are always retrospective, since individuals draw on remembered experiences (Ashforth et al., 2008: 345), yet these remembered experiences are also continuously collectively constructed. Thus identity work entails not only looking (individually) backward from the present point in time, (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Kimberly, 1987; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) or looking forward (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000; Ibarra, 1999; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), but also engaging (collectively) over time in identity work that shapes an organization's memory.

Our study also emphasizes the place of forgetting in such collective memory constructions. Identity endurance might operate by discouraging some ways of experiencing the past while simultaneously encouraging alternate ways of experiencing the same past. The limited organizational identity literature on memory tends to focus on what is remembered, not on what is never acknowledged (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Chreim, 2005: 587; Kimberly & Bouchikhi, 1995). Forgotten identities are generally considered merely because they were once

remembered (Biggart, 1977; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Fiol, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2007; Zilber, 2002). This leaves *systematic* forgetting as integral to long-term identity construction largely unaccounted for. Yet remembering and forgetting are two sides of the same memory phenomenon. Like voicing and self-editing (Bernstein, 1964; Chafe, 1980), sensegiving and sensehiding (Vaara & Monin, 2009) or learning and un-learning (Brunsson, 1998), they work concurrently. Shared beliefs about what elements of the past should be remembered to reinforce a collective identity are concomitant with shared beliefs about what elements of the past should *not* be remembered by the community (Anderson & Bjork, 1994; Anderson & Spellman, 1995; Douglas, 1986; MacLeod & Macrae, 2001; Misztal, 2003).

Deciding what to systematically forget or remember in a firm's history is an "ethics of memory" question (Margalit, 2002: 147): one involving conscious and/or unconscious decisions. David Whetten notes that "we commit to our deepest memory the things we dare not forget" (Whetten, 2006: 224). A parallel phenomenon, we argue, might also be at play, namely one in which we relegate to forgetting the things we dare *not* remember. The repeated forgetting of "who we were not" in an organization's history might prove as central to the endurance of a given identity as remembering "who we are."

The above proposition forces us to conceptualize forgetting as a collective identity-enactment strategy rather than just an accidental cognitive failure of individuals. The particular attention to forgetting is warranted because studies of collective memory have shown that forgetting is crucial in maintaining the integrity of collective identities (Rivera, 2008). Societies and ethnic groups are often prone to forgetting events that represent a threat to their identity. In post-World War II Europe, for instance, the pressing need to reintegrate war-torn societies limited nations' willingness to expose their recent past and "favored" forgetting (Misztal, 2003:

148). In France and Italy in particular, collaboration with the Nazi regime was largely forgotten, replaced by an elaborate and carefully cultivated myth of resistance for the sake of reconciliation and national unity (Rousso, 1991) or what we might label identity endurance. Similarly, organizational identity endurance might require organizational forgetting. An unanswered question is how much forgetting might be too much. For example, members might disidentify with an organization too prone to forgetting, underscoring the need for further studies of organizational members' experiences of forgotten identities.

Implications for Collective Memory Research

With respect to collective memory research and building on past work on organizational memory (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Casey, 1997; Walsh, 1995; Walsh & Ungson, 1991), our study first underscores the importance of treating organizations as mnemonic communities. We show that like families and nations, organizations—especially those that endure a long time—build up extensive collective memories that are worth closely examining. Organizations "remember" their identity not only at discrete, eventful moments in time, but repeatedly over extended periods. Such collective memories constitute rich narratives that organizational members can rely on to make sense of their past, present, and future.

In addition, our study suggests that the rhetorical history constructed by a firm aims not only at influencing external agents (such as competitors and customers) but also internal organizational members. This statement has important implications for collective memory research. While our study emphasized the ways in which collective memory sustains an organizational identity, a reverse directionality also likely operates. Thus if collective memory can be conceptualized as a form of organizational identity work, organizational identity work

might also be seen as constituting collective memories. Organizational identities could therefore be treated as "sites of memory," similar in essence to flags, anthems, or geographical places (Nora, 1996). Further research on the shifting nature of organizational identities might provide insights on the making of history. The shifting organizational identity of General Motors might, for instance, prove helpful in analyzing the firm's evolving collective memory.

Our case study also highlights the need to develop more nuanced understandings of forgetting as a form of collective memory. The different facets of remembering including commemorations, ceremonies, photographs, nostalgia, traditions, and bodily practices are well-documented in the literature (Boym, 2001; Connerton, 1989; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992; Mosse, 1975; Zelizer, 1998). By comparison, however, the various facets of forgetting are only beginning to be explored (Ciuk & Kostera, 2010; Connerton, 2008). By identifying and analyzing key facets of forgetting (here, structural omission and preemptive neutralization), we hope to encourage more empirical research in this area. The analysis of routine organizational historical traces (such as internal bulletins, memorandums, and procedures manuals) can in that regard perhaps help identify other facets of forgetting. The task is likely to be complicated by the fact that rarity and scarcity tend to induce historical data survival (Boorstin, 1989: 8). As an example, it is often easier to access precious engraved manuscripts from the Middle-Age than widely used almanacs from the same period. Similarly, a signed original inter-firm cooperation contract might be more easily located and accesses than routine organizational traces. Despite access complexities, a more systematic attention to such routine traces will probably yield insights into rich organizational histories. When studying organizations with identity contradictions, we speculate that analyses of routine traces will more likely showcase the backstage of identity work than analyses of more public data such as annual reports. Whereas

public reports tend to exhibit the results of identity negotiations, routine traces likely capture the struggles and identity work needed to attain those results.

Bridging Research Implications

Many of the already outlined implications lie at the intersection of organizational identity and collective memory research, yet some additional bridging implications are worth emphasizing. Most significantly, our study's findings challenge assumptions on where identity and collective memory reside. Because we suggest that a locus of identity work can be collective memory (and vice-versa), more attention needs to be paid to the historical dimension of identity work and the identity dimension of collective memory. For instance, to what extent is identity historically context dependent and how much is history malleable by identity dynamics? Moreover, if an organizational identity cannot only be captured in the present, how do we study it to account for its complexity? Also, if collective memory intersects with identity work, how do we account for the interplay?

Our findings also suggest that the collective identity of various communities can be intricately connected: an organization's identity may draw on elements from the historical identity of the institution in which it operates (e.g., a nation-state). Further research might want to examine the circumstances under which organizational identity might interact with institutional ones, specifically national ones (Chartier, 1985; Vallas, 1993: 70). As an example, Frenchness at Snecma built on, yet did not fully equate with Frenchness in other settings. Our study therefore raises new questions about the coupling and decoupling of historical institutional and organizational identities.

In particular, an organization's identity can be more strongly associated with a nation-state than the nation-state's own identity. For instance, an organization could be more "American" than the United States. Whereas nation-states' identities often prove complex, organizational identities tend to be more focused and easily controlled. Organizations (e.g., the Coca Cola Company) might therefore be able to develop "sharper" and "purer" national identities than nation-states. Organizational identity work might overlap in these and other instances with institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). As Mary Ann Glynn remarks, institutions such as nation-states can enable or disable organizational identities (Glynn, 2008). The identity work deployed in any organizational context can therefore echo, crystalize, or compete with other collective identities. Further inquiries into such interplays seem promising.

Practical Implications

Our findings have several important implications for practice. First, they suggest that sustaining an organizational identity requires more than managing valued identity attributes. Handling potential identity contradictions is also essential. When faced with such contradictions, managers might be inclined to ignore them; instead, proactively addressing them is central to identity endurance. The need for such action is often recognized in relation to external audiences (e.g., when hiring an external public relations firm to fix a brand's identity) but less so in relation to internal ones. A second implication is to recognize the need to refocus managerial attention on a firm's past, not only its future. While strategic planning and envisioning exercises are typically seen as part of a manager's job, the treatment of the past often fails to register as a critical task. Yet the ongoing crafting of a firm's rhetorical history facilitates the creation of a collective

memory that, in turn, can sustain a firm's identity. Thus, a manager's ability to infuse meaning into work depends in part on her ability to help others remember and forget.

Our study also highlights the significant role routine organizational traces play in a firm's collective memory. A third practical implication is for managers not to overlook the generative nature of such traces. The production of internal bulletins might seem like a mundane task, one possibly even outsourced. What our study suggests, however, is that routine traces can significantly shape and capture a firm's identity. They cumulatively create and reflect what many managers aim to promote, namely a shared sense of belonging among employees. The challenge for managers is double: first, to recognize the importance of what appears to be mundane and, second, to operate on a timeline that goes beyond their own promotion schedule. Managers might therefore need to expand their time horizon since the making of a collective memory typically extends over a longer period of time than any given job rotation or even individual tenure at a firm.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, like other case-based research, this study was not designed to assess the frequency of occurrences of repeated forgetting in organizations. Instead it aims to identify and analyze this form of organizational memory as it relates to organizational identity. Further studies might compare instances of organizational forgetting exhibited at different organizations and over time. Also, exploring what level of forgetting allows organizations to perform best in the long run could forge a link between organizational memory and performance. It is possible that a limited initial need for organizational identity work could confer long-term benefits, more or less as movie actors who are type-cast early on (as "action heroes," for example) have a higher

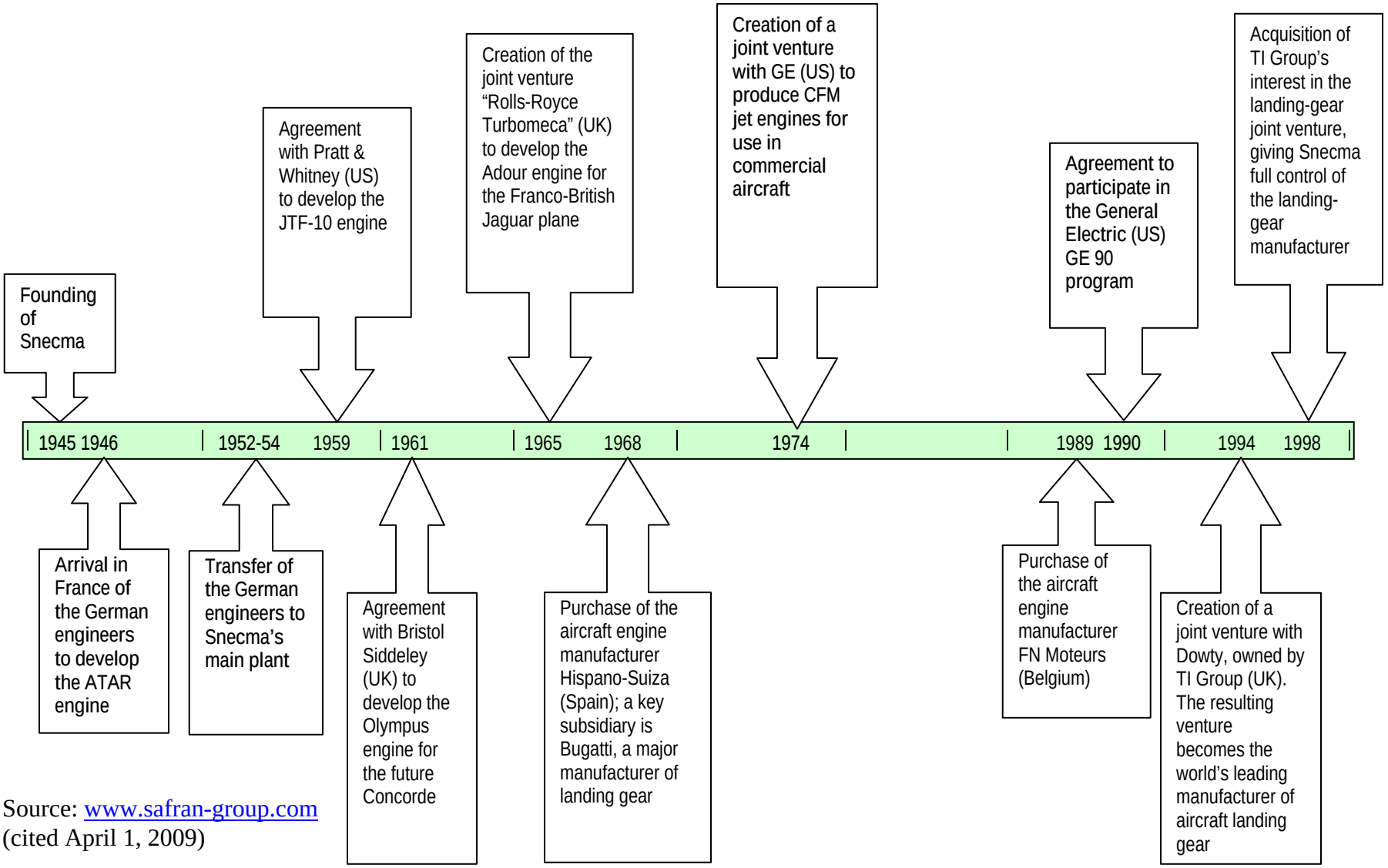
probability in the long run of finding work than actors who play a wider range of roles (Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & von Rittmann, 2003). Adding an organizational-performance variable to historical analyses might thus prove productive. Also identifying and analyzing instances and types of memory occurrences leading to decreased performance could suggest ways in which collective memory might backfire.

Second, we documented one of many possible intersections between organizational identity endurance and collective memory. Our focus is mainly on the projected official organizational identity—one that is integral to a firm's image and reputation (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fine, 2001; Fombrun, 1996). Yet an organization's identity can encompass additional aspects and be documented via different vantage points (Pratt, 2003): possibly leading to the emergence of multiple "core" elements of an identity (Corley et al., 2006: 91). The projected official organizational identity presented here likely coexists with other identities such as the firm's "vernacular" identity (Bodnar, 1992). Similarly, a national identity is likely one of the many cores that an organization can embrace (Bartel, Blader, & Wrzesniewski, 2007: 3). In addition, our analysis focuses on only one form of collective memory: the firm's official rhetorical history. Future research might want to study longitudinally multiple elements of an identity (e.g., official and vernacular ones) and examine how alternate facets of collective memory (e.g., traditions and industrial museums) might apply differently to some elements versus others. Workplace jokes and songs might, for instance, prove more relevant to the endurance of vernacular identities than other facets of memory.

The main purpose of this case study was to generate new theoretical insights, yet our findings may apply to other contexts as well. As an example, comparable identity-preservation attempts on the GE side might also exist. More broadly, at the international level, our findings

might extend to joint ventures, international scientific collaborations, and cross-border acquisitions. Also, at the national level, our findings might apply, for instance, to local banks integrating into national banking groups or local funeral homes being consolidated into national chains. Given that social identities, including organizational ones, have been posited to arise from frictions (Fontdevila, Opazo, & White, 2011: 185; White, 2008: 9), repeated forgetting in a firm's rhetorical history may be more consequential phenomena than the first few decades of organizational-identity research suggest. The continued historical examination of such phenomena and other facets of collective memory might also provide novel keys to a better understanding of organizational identity work. Only by paying close attention to the collective and historical dynamics that sustain identities will the puzzle of identity endurance gradually be solved.

Figure 1
Snecma's Main Foreign Collaborations, 1945–2000
(foreign collaborators' country of origin in parentheses; events discussed in this article in boldface)



Source: www.safran-group.com
(cited April 1, 2009)

FIGURE 2
Bulletins' Coverage of Snecma Industrial Activity, 1953-1999

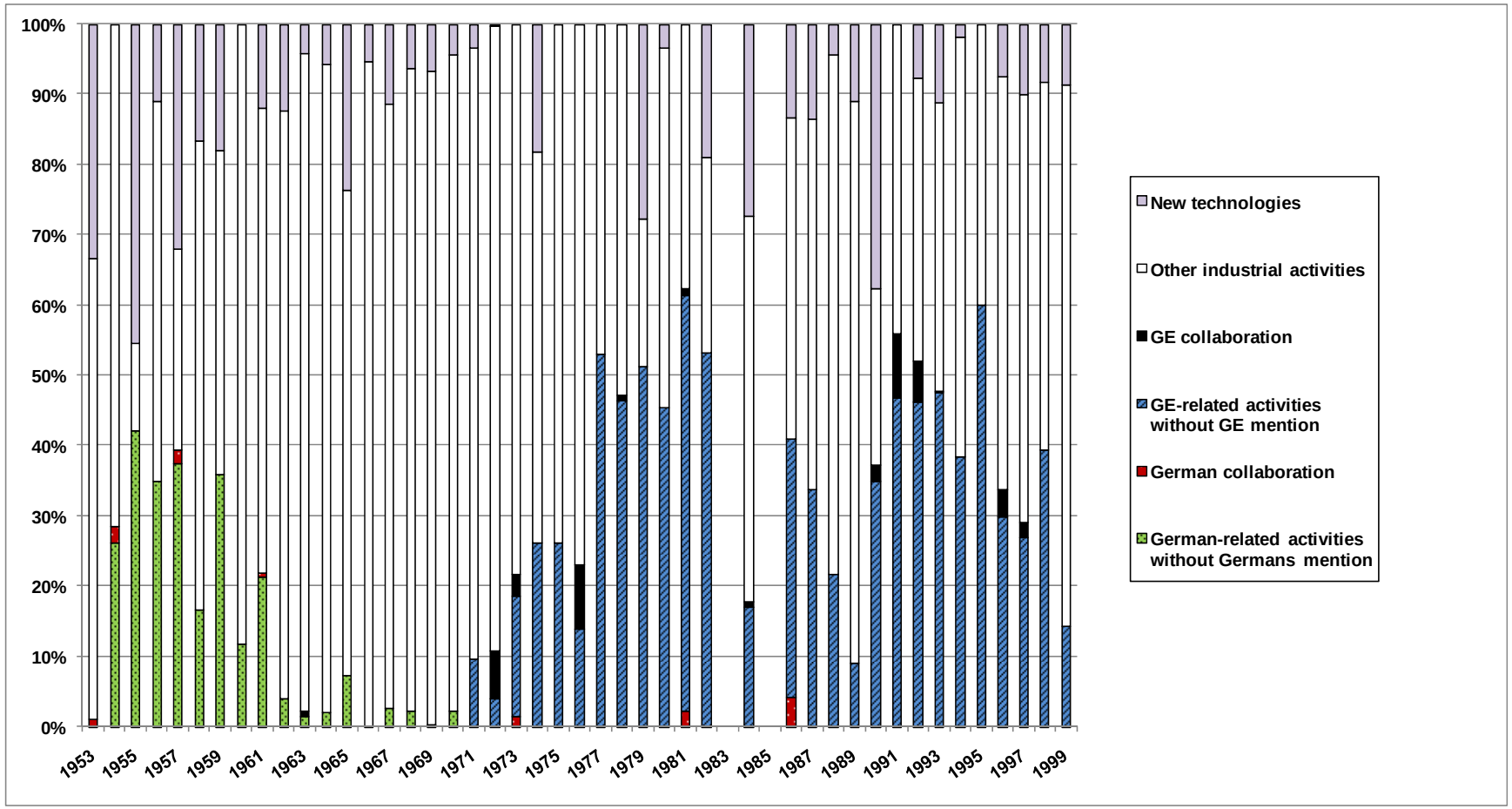


TABLE 1
Bulletins' Main Content Areas, 1953-1999

Main content areas	Representative excerpts
Internal affairs	"Pre-retirement measures will allow volunteer employees in the trades listed below to benefit from a pre-retirement funded by the firm." (1992) "M. David Eidelman, formerly head of the spare parts department at the Direction of materials in use, was named June 1st 1972 head of the computers department." (1972)
Industry overview	"The Bourget airport stopped its commercial traffic and is transforming its activity." (1981) "1977: A very encouraging year for the Airbus A 300: Between January 1st and December 31st 1977, the Airbus Industries consortium received 46 orders, including 26 options." (1978)
Industrial activity, including:	
- *Germans-related activities (without Germans mention)*	"The activities for the various Snecma entities entail the study and development of the ATAR… as well as the mass production of the ATAR 101-D." (1953) "The year 1972 at Snecma will essentially see the rise in pace of the ATAR production to 20 engines per month…" (1972)
- *German collaboration*	"The experience [of the ATAR engines] developed by the "O Group" under Dr. Oestrich's leadership in Germany was remarkably transferred to France after the war." (1986) "In 1945, a group of 120 German engineers and technicians assembled by Mr. Oestrich settled at Rickenbourg, near the Lake Constance." (1981)
- *GE-related activities (without GE mention)*	"The first test engine [CFM56-5C2] ran at Villaroche on December 27, 1989 and has since accumulated many test hours. " (1990) "The rebound in orders for civilian motors in 1996 led to a high rise in the manufacturing pace. The number of engines to build had been double in 1997: Thus creating a real challenge for the manufacturing…" (1997)
- *GE collaboration*	"Team GE/SNECMA: A model of cooperation. It's 2:30 in the afternoon. Second Shift is just beginning at GE Aircraft Engines. Assembler Pat Scott arrives at her work station in the factory floor at Evandale, Ohio, and begins assembly of a CFM56 engine." (1991) "General Electric: Our new partner. GE's story goes back to the star of U.S. jet industry. It was in October 1942, the day the first American "jet" flew off a dry California lake." (1972)
- *Other industrial activities*	"The 1980 rehabilitation of the Gennevilliers mill and the 1989 launch of its extension did not permit the collocation of all activities. This will be done in March 1994."(1994) "In the context of client support, the mission of our training center is to offer users a series of courses in all aspects of our products." (1993)
- *New technologies*	"Studies are under way to allow for noise reduction on new motors." (1985) "The experimental compressor at Pierrelatte is launched. This high-strength compressor… was developed as a feasibility study for the [French] Atomic Energy Agency…" (1971)

TABLE 2
Bulletins' Content Distribution, 1953-1999

Year	Number of pages published	Percentage of pages devoted to							
		Internal affairs	Industry overview	Germans-related activities without Germans mention	German collaboration	GE-related activities without GE mention	GE collaboration	Other industrial activities	New technologies
1953	72	87.5	0	0	0.1 (0)*	0	0	8.2	4.2
1954	282	84.4	0.7	3.9	0.4 (0.4)*	0	0	10.6	0
1955	366	90.2	4.4	2.3	0	0	0	0.7	2.5
1956	320	61.2	14.5	8.5	0	0	0	13.2	2.7
1957	272	73.3	7.2	7.3	0.4 (0.4)*	0	0	5.6	6.3
1958	216	55.8	33.1	1.9	0	0	0	7.4	1.9
1959	188	62.6	16.6	7.4	0	0	0	9.6	3.7
1960	96	72.9	15.5	1.4	0	0	0	10.2	0
1961	104	74.0	12.4	2.9	0.1 (0.1)*	0	0	8.9	1.6
1962	104	54.5	15.1	1.3	0	0	0	25.4	3.8
1963	96	43.6	14.0	0.6	0	0	0.3 (0.3)*	39.7	1.8
1964	104	44.4	8.5	1.0	0	0	0	43.5	2.7
1965	104	45.6	25.2	2.1	0	0	0	20.2	6.9
1966	104	45.4	8.9	0	0	0	0	43.3	2.4
1967	104	47.8	9.9	1.2	0	0	0	36.3	4.8
1968	88	50.2	8.3	0.9	0	0	0	38.0	2.6
1969	88	54.4	11.5	0.1	0	0	0	31.7	2.3
1970	104	54.6	10.9	0.8	0	0	0	32.2	1.5
1971	124	55.0	18.1	0	0	2.6	0	23.4	0.9
1972	80	50.6	8.6	0	0	1.6	2.8 (2.8)*	36.3	0.1
1973	88	47.6	12.3	0	0.6 (0.6)*	6.9	1.3 (1.3)*	31.4	0
1974	80	61.2	9.0	0	0	7.8	0	16.6	5.4
1975	80	69.4	13.1	0	0	4.6	0	12.9	0
1976	72	62.7	7.2	0	0	4.2	2.8 (1.4)*	23.1	0
1977	80	68.6	6.4	0	0	13.3	0	11.8	0
1978	80	65.0	15.8	0	0	8.9	0.1 (0.1)*	10.2	0
1979	80	54.9	9.1	0	0	18.4	0	7.6	10
1980	64	71.5	6.2	0	0	10.2	0	11.4	0.8
1981	60	46.0	17.3	0	0.8 (0.8)*	21.8	0.3 (0.3)*	13.8	0
1982	24	62.9	4.2	0	0	17.5	0	9.2	6.3
1984	40	56.0	7.5	0	0	6.3	0.3 (0.3)*	20	10
1986	110	73.5	4.7	0	0.9 (0.9)*	8.0	0	9.9	2.9
1987	120	40.1	23.0	0	0	12.5	0	19.4	5.0
1988	122	73.4	8.2	0	0	4.0	0	13.6	0.8
1989	103	64.5	4.5	0	0	2.8	0	24.8	3.4
1990	184	57.9	16.1	0	0	9.1	0.6 (0.6)*	6.5	9.8
1991	161	65.6	14.0	0	0	9.6	1.9 (0.6)*	9.0	0
1992	256	58.4	11.1	0	0	14.1	1.8 (0.8)*	12.3	2.3
1993	172	59.5	9.3	0	0	14.8	0.1 (0)*	12.8	3.5
1994	172	62.7	4.7	0	0	12.6	0	19.5	0.6
1995	40	50	12.5	0	0	22.5	0	15.0	0
1996	116	50.2	4.3	0	0	13.6	1.7 (0.9)*	26.7	3.4
1997	128	45.4	0	0	0	14.8	1.2 (0.4)*	33.2	5.5
1998	104	58.6	6.3	0	0	13.8	0	18.5	2.9
1999	70	45.0	5.0	0	0	7.1	0	38.6	4.3
	5,622	62.2	10.8	1.7	0.1 (0.1)*	5.2	0.3 (0.2)*	16.9	2.9

*Notes*_ The years 1983 and 1985 are missing. The years 1984 and 1995 produced only 2 and 1 bulletins respectively.
* Figures in parenthesis indicate the percentage of pages devoted to either the German or the GE collaboration that simultaneously discuss elements of Snecma's national identity.

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