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Foot on the Rope: Corporate Apologia and the Discourse of Vince McMahon

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FOOT ON THE ROPE: CORPORATE APOLOGIA AND THE DISCOURSE OF VINCE MCMAHON

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Vince McMahon, chairman of World Wrestling Entertainment, is a unique corporate leader. He is also a performer for his entertainment company and the WWE possesses a unique connection with its audience. The WWE and professional wrestling are influential elements of popular culture.

The study of corporate image management has been the focus of many organizational communication studies. One specific genre of rhetorical criticism in this area is image restoration studies. This genre concerns itself with how corporate leaders handle themselves in situations that challenge their company's reputation.

Image restoration studies have been limited to their own genre and have rarely incorporated other forms of rhetorical analysis. Thus there is a gap in literature in terms of assessing image restoration as a reflection of cultural values. McMahon provides an example to perform such a study as he is not only a corporate leader but at the center of a fixture in North American popular culture. This study suggests that Benoit's (1997) five

image restoration typologies— denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification— can be narrowed down to two categories. These categories are action justification and remorse.

Drawing upon media and myth analysis, this study proposes that McMahon's use of action justification strategies is reflective of a masculine value system in North American society. Therefore the author proposes further study utilizing the two categories of typologies for the purposes of indicating the model's value. The study also suggests that McMahon presents a unique case for further research because of his dual role as a corporate leader and performer.

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With that in mind, I dedicate this work to the following people,

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> Vince McMahon is probably the greatest wrestling promoter there's ever been and...I wouldn't trust him and I think anyone who does trust him is being very foolish based on his track record (Dave Meltzer, editor of *Wrestling Observer*, Blaustein, 2000).

Vincent Kennedy McMahon, Jr. is faced with a variety of challenges on a regular basis. One is to portray the character of the scheming "Mr. McMahon" on World Wrestling Entertainment (formerly "WWF") programming, seen weekly by millions of people all across the world. Another is to be the chief creative component behind the scenes for the WWE: a company that he chairs and has transformed over the course of 20 years.

The most fascinating test that McMahon faces is that of corporate and public image management. Many devoted professional wrestling fans regard him as a creative genius and as the man who has defied great odds to become a corporate success while being a "man of the people", a man who gives the audience what it wants. Yet as the chair of a currently public company, he attempts to command the respect of many in a corporate world who are skeptical of his bombast and vigor which often mirrors the overly exaggerated characters that pervade his programming.

The challenge of image maintenance for McMahon has not always been the same over the course of his controversial career. He has fought against the questioning of his character and integrity by people both in and outside of the professional wrestling business. Both his onscreen and offscreen roles have been the subject of modification as he has attempted to steer his company out of crises and into the cutting edge of the mainstream.

I propose to discuss these difficulties in an in-depth thesis on the career and image of Vince McMahon. I will provide a brief description of rhetorical criticism to set up my research query for the thesis. I will then discuss literature that examines content relevant to this field of study, followed by an explication of methodology for the purpose of the criticism. Lastly, I will define the parameters of content to be studied, followed by a proposed outline of chapters for the thesis. However, before addressing these points, I begin with an important question: What is the value of providing an analysis of Vince McMahon?

FOCUS ON VINCE MCMAHON

There are two points to discuss when establishing the value of academic exploration of Vince McMahon. The first point of merit is to briefly discuss the intrigue and importance of professional wrestling. The second point of merit is note the historical crossroads that the figure of McMahon has reached.

Until *The Osbournes* dethroned it (Balsmeyer, 2002), the WWE produced the highest rated regularly broadcast cable program in the United States from 1998 forward. It also produces the greatest revenues in the pay-per-view industry. In defending the importance of professional wrestling as a rhetorical subject, the easiest element to defend is the size of its audience. Yet it is crucial to explain how it can be viewed as a curiosity: as a site for questioning.

Professional wrestling has been the subject of performance analysis by many (Morton & O'Brien, 1985, Mazer, 1998). In articulating my interest in wrestling as a performance, I first cite Fine's (1984) description of a performance event:

> A cluster of interacting variables characterizes a performance event...these implicit or explicit expectations for performance may be termed "ground rules for performance," or "the set of cultural themes and ethical and social interactional organizing principles that govern the conduct of performance (pp. 62-63).

Professional wrestling provides a unique forum of inquisition: some are still unsure how to characterize it as a performance event. What are the audience's expectations? Is it considered a sport, or even a pseudo-sport by anyone that views it? With an established viewing pattern over a number of years, one could assume that there are variables interacting in the product that characterize "wrestling" and even "Vince McMahon" in the minds of the public. Discussing the elements at play that make today's professional wrestling so popular (as opposed to the mid-1990s) can provide insight on the minds of a great portion of the North American population.

Secondly, if one agrees that professional wrestling is a significant part of North American popular culture, then s/he must acknowledge the importance of Vince McMahon. Since his purchase of the World Wrestling Federation in 1982, it has been transformed from a regional business to a internationally recognized public organization that claims annual nine figure profits (http://www.wwecorpbiz.com/). Now is an opportune time to take a look at what has brought McMahon to the forefront of pop culture as he has come to a crossroads in terms of his stature as a businessman and public figure.

While maintaining a prominent role as an onscreen performer, McMahon has seen great business success and failure in recent times. His most publicized non-wrestling venture, the XFL, was a resounding failure that caused millions of dollars in losses for WWF Entertainment, Inc. and the National Broadcasting Corporation (Schrader, May 11,

2001). Conversely, national competition in the professional wrestling industry collapsed as the WWFE purchased rival World Championship Wrestling at a firesale price while fledgling Extreme Championship Wrestling fell into bankruptcy. This has left Vince McMahon as the most identifiable figure in the professional wrestling industry but with many of his critics claiming that he can not achieve success outside of it.

This is why it is a good time to examine McMahon as a public figure. He is clearly identified as the most important individual in professional wrestling— a strong element of North American popular culture that serves a unique performance event. The WWF-WCW war and the quest for non-wrestling success are two elements that have helped to define McMahon's career. He is presently pursuing his career with the absence of both, providing a critic with a time to stop and look at what brought this man to this point in history.

I will discuss the blending of McMahon's actions and persona as a president and/or chairman and his actions as a performer and/or a public celebrity. Research indicates that my proposed thesis would be the first of its kind on McMahon. His position as a public figure is unique because professional wrestling itself is a unique profession. It is difficult to find a comparable public figure for analysis. Research that explores areas of both corporate and public persona must be examined.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before demonstrating how the two images build into my research question, I will discuss literature on the projection of a corporate image and on popular culture. To complement my discussion on popular culture literature, I will briefly address the

parallels between the textuality of wrestling and sports and discuss literature on sports as well.

Corporate Image Building

In a chapter discussing the building of corporate image, Garbett (1988) establishes six factors for controlling a company's image: the reality of the company, the newsworthiness of the company and its activities, diversity of the company, communications effort, time and memory decay. The reality of the company refers to the scope of activities that an organization can realistically endeavor to given its budget and situational constructs. The newsworthiness element describes how much attention the media is willing to give to a company given what its business is and what its activities are— and whether or not the most newsworthy elements are positive or negative. The diversity element is the number of endeavors an organization takes upon itself (e.g. whether it limits itself to producing one form of entertainment or branches off into a variety of genres). The communication effort is the quality and quantity of efforts made by an organization both in providing information to the public and to potential business partners about itself.

The final two elements— time and memory decay— seem somewhat misplaced and ineffective in discussing the building of a corporate image. These aspects instead focus on company and leaders' efforts to *maintain* and *uphold* a reputation that is would seem to be of little interest to this study. The time element simply equates the number of years associated with providing a product with the strength of that organization's image (e.g. Coke has produced beverages for decades in comparison to the fledgling Virgin organization). When investigating the memory decay element, one looks into passing of

time and how well a company keeps its positive accomplishments in the public's memory while eroding or erasing the negatives.

Dowling (2001) proposes an updated model of the theory outlining factors in establishing corporate images among analysts and shareholders. The five factors listed by Dowling include the CEO/top team, past financial performance of either involved individuals and/or the industry itself, strategy, analysts' expectations, and corporate social responsibility. Dowling lists a sixth factor, poor publicity, in parenthesis stating that "there is conflicting evidence about whether this factor will change the evaluations of analysts" (p. 60). These elements are more realistic in terms of applying a critique as they more accurately assess the initial nature of the business. However, this theory still overlooks the building of image for the general public— the potential consumers.

I must also briefly discuss the issue of CEO/top team further. This model deals only with the expectations of individuals' actual performance. Pinsdorf (1999) notes that the work of a collective in a corporate setting is often geared towards the focusing on and projection of a positive image of the leader. This particularly unorthodox strategy is something that can perhaps make more sense and be put into a proper frame with analysis of the specialized ritual of wrestling itself, separating it from any other business.

Discussing Dowling's concept of *time* and *memory decay* is less relevant in the area of Vince McMahon developing his initial persona. It is more crucial when one looks at how he completely re-shaped that image in the late-1990s. To some, this was the development of a persona, but for many people who came to watch professional wrestling at this time, it was a re-projection.

Unlike most others in a corporate position, Vince McMahon has worked within a unique frame of reference for his audience: many initially were not even not let on the "secret" that he ran the company. Yet the fact that he was "the boss" became a central part of his performing role in the late 1990s. My thesis can provide insight into this unique re-creation of persona.

The potential consumers play an important role in this re-creation: a factor that Pinsdorf overlooks. There is work to be done that investigates not only how corporate leaders project an image but also how the audience informs the outcome of these efforts by their interpretations. This is especially relevant in an analysis of McMahon, who doubles as a performer before a *live* audience weekly. This situation ensures that the public is given the privilege of providing a direct frame around these performances.

Popular Culture Literature

Professional wrestling is just one component of what can be termed "popular culture." Brummett (1994) refers to popular culture as "the everyday objects, actions and events to which we are constantly exposed" (p. 4). However, most academic endeavors that claim a popular culture focus are those that look at media presented for entertainment purposes. There are many unique genres of entertainment that share the television spotlight with wrestling that have produced literature in the study of popular culture.

Some studies on popular culture focus on the element of ritual: particularly research on popular culture that replicates itself on a more frequent basis (weekly or daily). For example, Tavener (2000) discusses the genre of the "tabloid talk show" and notes how it does not merely entertain but:

> its effective involvement of a representative cross-section of working-class America turns the show into a social space where communal rituals are forged...they enable an emotionally charged but safe expression of problems in a form that affords both the experience of group solidarity and individual transcendence (p. 77).

Harrington and Bielby (1995) echo this opinion in their analysis on daytime soap operas. However, their genre of focus differs greatly from the talk show in that the characters are ongoing and developing as opposed to the continually changing characters on a talk show. The attachment to this form of media is particularly strong according to authors:

> ...because daytime dramas specialize in narratives dealing with personal life and involve characters who develop periods of time, authenticity encourages a distinctive response among soap fans: they merge the character's persona with the actor's by blending the real qualities of the actor with the fictional ones of the character...perceived intimacy is evident in some of the reasons fans give for wanting to meet celebrities (p. 50).

Viewers can also bring themselves into popular culture in order to shape their perspective. A text can become popular culture by providing us with a "happy ending" but also by providing a sense of justification for how we feel about the "real world." In studying the film, *A Clockwork Orange*, Elsaesser (1976) describes how realism can lend to the popularity of a text regardless (or perhaps because) of how disturbing or violent it may be. In this case, the audience approaches the film *wanting* something but not necessarily "mindless entertainment." The text frames the audience's "fund of dissatisfaction" with their own lives (p. 195). It can then either give the viewer hope or, in the *Clockwork Orange* example, a confirmation that his or her views are accurate.

In turn, ritualistic viewing patterns and attachment to narrative are just two elements of the allure of popular culture presentations. Once the ritual of viewing a text

is established, the process becomes a two-way flow: the audience informs the process of programming as much as the producers of the text inform the meaning of the text to the audience (Miller, 1990, Miller and McHoul, 1998). The increasing forms of interaction in media, combined with a continuing tracking of ratings or sales, allows the producer of texts to understand what his or her audience wants and is responding favorably to.

However, if one chooses to view media presentations as commodities, Haug (1989) states that the producers of texts hold a distinct advantage in shaping the audience's expectations. For instance, he discusses the advertising of fashion and scents through the images of romance. The user then associates these products with romance; the commodities become means to the end of that pursuit. Hence, a cycle completes itself where the user has been taught about romantic pursuit by the advertising: s/he has learned behavior from the commodity (pp. 15-17). So the purpose of texts is not always to validiate the viewer's thoughts but to teach or indoctrinate. Given time and borrowing from other images, pop culture can teach the audience what to expect of itself and how to behave in a pop culture world.

McMahon has a distinct edge in the present day as the WWE is the only major entertainment company producing a professional wrestling product. The scope of competitors (such as World Wrestling Allstars) is extremely limited. The WWE provides its audience with an expectation of what a professional wrestling show looks like.

One text that bears similarity to professional wrestling is the world of sport. Wrestling is a scripted event whereas a sport is carefully arranged but without a predetermined outcome. Yet both present the continual image of competition to their

viewers. There has also been a great deal of literature dealing with ritual elements in the world of sport.

The Sporting World

The study of ritual seems tailor-made for analysis of the world of mainstream sports (e.g. football, baseball, basketball and hockey). A popular academic conception is the comparison of sports to religion. Prebbish (1993) suggests that this is a very realistic model with which to look at high-profile professional sports, citing numerous similarities between the repetitive aspects of sports such as football and baseball and the practices of religions across North America. While acknowledging such similarities, Higgs (1995) states that sports and religion are incompatible and that sporting events often constitute themselves as a heresy to religious practice.

Others see sports as less of a religion and more of a site of male aggression being put in an acceptable arena. Parallels between the often violent world of wrestling and sport are clearer when one discusses this view. Initial reaction to rising violence in the sporting world led to a rather apocalyptic proclamation from Atyeo (1979) who parallels such incidents with rising violence in the Roman era:

> The future of violent sports seems assured. Games will grow harder and bloodier to feed the rising appetite of an audience which grow both increasingly more jaded and satiated with violence (p. 377).

Such viewpoints are tempered with theories to discuss how sport may provide an avenue for violent impulses but not for an armageddon. Marsh (1978) puts forth a theory for ritual aggression in sport: "By turning the whole conflict business into aggressive ritual, fights became stylized games and displays" (p. 34). A partial agreement is cast by Dunning (1999) who tempers this opinion by describing rules in place of various games

that act sometimes as the *suppresser* to such instinct. Aggression is acceptable— but to a point.

The most important similarity, however, between wrestling and sport is "stylized conflict" as described by Marsh. The sporting world is one where people in a variety of social standings in life "compete" vicariously through their favorite teams. By identifying oneself with a winning team, a lower middle class citizen can feel like s/he part of a winning cause. Mullen and Mazzocco (2000) summarize this: "individual identification with a sports team can become a symbolic leveler that seems to provide a collective sense of identity within the ever intensive acquisitive and competitive nature of modern nature" (p. 349). Yet at the same time, they concur that the "powers-that-be" still rear their ugly head in this fantasy world: "so-called "clock-run" games...are far more adaptable and representative of corporate scientific management techniques that increasingly serve to rationalize and standardize both work and leisure times" (p. 360). The presence of "everyday life" constrictions still exist which perhaps makes victory all the sweeter.

In this line of thinking, many theorists have described the sporting world as a reconstruction of reality, not only through its practice but also by through its slogans. The behavior taught to children that the most important thing about sporting is "how you play the game" is contrasted by the aggressive competitiveness that marks professional sports- both in its participants and its fans. Dunning (1999) who describes sporting events as "tests of identity." The meaning of victory is of great importance in this arena, as described by Sage (1990):

> For an example of how meanings are socially constructed, we can take a slogan familiar to most: Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. Is this a universal truth, a law of nature? Of course not. It is a socially constructed piece of lore around which some very specific meanings about the quest for victory in sport have been formed (p. 5).

In terms of assessing the WWE and the perception of Vince McMahon as a reconstruction of reality, the uniqueness of the genre of wrestling can not be ignored. The "clock" that represents scientific management is almost never found in a WWE wrestling match. The rules that represent corporate oppressors are often times either completely absent or made so visibly blatant (e.g. a unpopular commissioner appointing biased "guest referees") so as to villainize the concept of having rules to begin with.

There are valid parallels between the WWE and pro sports. The WWE has also seen an increase in violence (the infusion of the "hardcore" style involving multiple weapons and more high-risk maneuvers). The WWE also conducts its show before live audiences who attach their loyalty to certain individuals and teams. However, the sporting world (for the most part) lacks the outlandish caricatures that the WWE provides. Most importantly, it lacks a "creative team" that steers the "results" specifically in a way that it feels will produce the most profitable reaction.

It is not enough to investigate Vince McMahon as the head of an entertainment industry, or as a performer on a popular television program. His dual role and the nature of professional wrestling— which borrows elements from both television and sporting culture— create a void that neither sports nor drama research can individually criticize. The essential problem that re-emerges in the literature that I have discussed is that it is very focused on specific types of corporate figures and entertainment genres but none like Vince McMahon or professional wrestling.

There is an acknowledgment on my behalf that McMahon can be examined not only as a person but as a text to be read with a critical eye. He can be read as a text and is placed firmly within different texts depending upon his situation (performer, chairman or celebrity). The best way to engage in a symbolic analysis of such a prominent figure in such a unique setting is to uncover the layers of meaning surrounding him. Like many in positions of power, McMahon has vociferous critics and defenders. It would seem that his defenders are many— millions watch his product weekly. This is despite McMahon's often-villainous portrayal of himself in character on WWE television.

He has endured a series of public tribulations. Some have put in question on a moral scale, others have put his reputation as a creative force in question. He has also been the subject of paradoxical views. He has been accused of bullying by small-time promoters and he has made similar complaints against Ted Turner. He made millions upon millions of dollars— at one point, he was valued as a billionaire by Forbes magazine— and yet he has championed himself as a common man against adverse media forces. Some have championed him as a hero that has allowed his business to grow. Others have derided him as a man with no sense of ethics or morals.

Thus it is seen that there are many factors at play that have brought Vince McMahon to where he is today. His performance and corporate image have intersected to create an overall public persona that I seek to identify. For the purposes of this study, I lay out these two issues for consideration:

1) McMahon's corporate image in the face of adversity, critics, and organizational crisis.

2) McMahon's construction of public persona through interviews and through performance.

McMahon's evolution both as a public persona and as a corporate individual have been tied to situations that have put either his reputation or his company's in question. His construction of both corporate image and public persona has informed his reputation. There is a great deal of interplay between McMahon's roles. The three aforementioned points play into the formation of my questions about Vince McMahon:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) How has Vince McMahon handled situations where his and/or his company's image have been called into question?

2) How has this affected the creation and re-creation of McMahon as a corporate figure?

3) How has McMahon managed his role as president or chair in balance with his role as a performer?

4) What cultural values does McMahon reflect with his management of these roles?

METHODS

Brummett (1994) describes rhetoric as "the ways in which signs influence people" (p. 4) and states that texts both wield rhetorical influence and as sites of struggle over meaning. As a critic, one must investigate the struggles over meaning because it is where the power of the text lies. A text is nothing if there is no meaning to its viewer. This is

what the act of criticism is designed to uncover but with strong understanding of the elements that shape that meaning. Brock, Scott and Chesboro (1990) define criticism as "an art of evaluating with knowledge and propriety" (p. 13). Thus, as Brummett (1994) states, "critics are meaning detectives; their role is to explain what texts mean" (p. 70).

This is what I seek to do in the analysis of Vince McMahon. Rather than simply investigating the texts that he produces, I seek to find the meaning in him *as* a text. This is not a simple process. Rhetorical criticisms can be rendered ineffectual if they are conducted without sensitivity to a specific approach that is geared towards the rhetorical situation.

I first seek to address various situations in which McMahon has handled difficulty with image. This analysis must then be interpreted to create a rhetorical meaning. For the strict purpose of analyzing McMahon's discourse, the most relevant form of study is apologia and image restoration. However narrative criticism is important to consider—as McMahon crafts stories in his defense. There is a certain amount of interplay that is possible with these methods but I will discuss this after explicating the approaches.

Corporate Apologia/Image Restoration

Frye (1957) writes that the "study of genres is based on analogies in form" (p. 99). These forms communicate specific strategies and/or situations that make the rhetoric involved unique in some form. Campbell and Jamieson (1990) further this by stating that "if the recurrence of similar forms establishes a genre, then genres are groups of discourses which share substantive, stylistic, and situational characteristics" (p. 335).

Corporate apologia theory is devised to handle the characteristics of discourse from business individuals and groups in times of a company crisis. Vince McMahon's

action as WWF chairman in light of negative publicity due to the death of performer Owen Hart is an example. Corporate apologia theory development is observed in the work of Ware and Linkguel (1973). They describe four factors of corporate self-defense: denial, differentiation, bolstering and transcendence. Denial simply entails disputing or disproving an accusation. Differentiation involves separating an element from the context in which the audience already views it. Bolstering is any "rhetorical strategy which reinforces the existence of a fact, object or relationship" (p. 277). Lastly, transcendence transfers a fact or object of criticism from a specific scope to a "larger or broader and more favorable context."

This approach is a strong introduction to corporate apologia analysis. However, William Benoit (1997), who is considered a foremost authority on the study of image restoration, has expanded upon the theory. He provides a succinct description of an attack that instigates a corporate crisis: "The accused is held responsible for an action. That act is considered offensive" (p. 178). He identifies five "typologies" of image restoration strategies (p. 179).

The first is denial "in which the accused simply repudiates the accusation or shifts blame elsewhere" (Benoit & Brinson, 1994, p. 77). The second is evasion of responsibility. The accused acknowledges the action but argues that there was provocation, lack of information leading to the action, the act was accidental or it was committed with good intentions. The third typology is reducing the offensiveness of an event. There are a variety of ways the accused may do this. S/he may bolster the company's image, minimize the unpleasantness of the act, attack the accuser (such as

challenging his or her credibility), compare the act to more offensive similar one or offer compensation to the injured party (p. 77).

The final two typologies require the accused admitting wrongdoing and requesting forgiveness (Burke, 1970, Benoit & Brinson, p. 77). One is corrective action: the accused acknowledges a problem and vows to take steps to fix it. The other is mortification; the accused apologizes for the act and its perceived offense (p. 179).

While the Benoit model is extensive and highly effectual in providing in-depth analysis, there are a number of problems that one must address before proceeding with such a generic criticism of discourse. First, the four scenarios proposed for analysis in this study provide different criteria. Benoit's description of the accused being held for "an action" does not prove effective if one considers a case of multiple actions that are considered offensive or multiple accusations.

Ware and Linkguel (1973) state that "the questioning of a man's moral nature, motives, or reputation is qualitatively different from the challenging of his policies" (p. 274). For some of McMahon's critics, the most important issue is a specific wrongdoing or series of wrongdoings that they wish to address. Yet for the others, it is the overall morality of the individual that they question. So it is important not to disregard Ware and Linkguel's model outright as the concept of bolstering is important in the analysis of defenses. It provides an effective tool of analysis in cases where overall character is called into question.

It is also important to address recent discussions of Benoit's theory and potential misinterpretation. Burns and Bruner (2000) suggest that the term "image" is subject to potential misinterpretation as it may suggest a static or homogenous representation of an

organization: "A corporation's image is not fixed...we seek to avoid essentialism in describing the target." They also argue that in defending corporate reputations, new identities are formed rather than a restoration of a prior image. Benoit (2000) responds by stating that the focus of his theory is not a regression of identity but rather the constant creation of identity for a multiple number of audiences and how they interact and react to public corporate discourse.

I feel that the Benoit model is still sufficient for use in this criticism with two caveats. The first is that the use of such a model is tempered with a recognition of bolstering. Secondly, the criticism is applied with the understanding of the changing public perceptions of an individual or organization.

Narrative Analysis

White (1992) claims ideological analysis "is based on the assumption that cultural artifacts— literature, film, television, and so forth— are produced in specific historical contexts, by and for specific social groups" (p. 163). White goes on to discuss the narratives of television programming as shaping, and essentially serving as, these cultural artifacts. So when examining the presentation of Vince McMahon— a man who presents a weekly television story— narrative criticism seems very appropriate.

There has been work in the past that has articulated the shaping of "moral plays" out of context or the creation of "good reasons" for behavior via narrative (Dobkin, 1992, Fisher 1985). Such criticism can also be used with an understanding of the rhetor's past, shaping the overall vision of the programming. For example, in critiquing Michael Jackson's video "Dangerous," Lynch (2001) notes prevailing themes that reference past

incidents in Jackson's career. Stories are subject to modification over time depending on circumstances, and to the levels of attention that one has from different audiences.

Silverman (1982) concurs, suggesting analyzing disclosure of the self as a construction of the self:

> Auto-bio-graphizing is the writing of the self as text. In other words, the dialectic of selfhood is inscribed as textuality. Writing the self or subject is an activity in which the self or subject attempts to account for itself. The accounting is its textuality (p. 258).

This veers into the specific realm of personal narrative criticism. This is an especially useful perspective in terms of this study, which is directed towards an individual figure and his presentation. However, Langellier (1998) suggests such an approach does not necessarily exclude criticism of audience and situation. In fact, she suggests that personal narrative criticism should problematize the audience and situation: "performing personal narrative is always a process of decontextualizing (from experience, from an interview) and recontextualizing a story for a particular audience" (p. 210). One must not also forget that the critical opinion that *all* texts are dynamic meeting places where the audience helps to shape identity by interacting with its author (Longhurst, 1995).

So in looking at the audience and situation, what does a rhetor address? Madison (1998) describes personal narrative as the performance of *possibilities* and of *representation*. The former concerns the empowerment of the audience to make meaning. The later concerns the storyteller's representation of an ideology or construct.

Madison's approach is a simple one: discussing what the audience *can* make of a narrative and what the narrator *tries to* make out of it. This is particularly useful for both

discussing public image and for blending with the apologia criticism in terms of providing "good reason."

PARAMETERS OF STUDY

Vince McMahon's national promoting career began in 1982. I have narrowed and divided his professional life into three important "eras" that demonstrate his evolving persona. These are: 1984-1990, 1991-1994 and 1997-2001.

He began his legacy as the head of the WWF and the first impressions that he created as the figurehead of the company. During this period that McMahon created the term "sports entertainment" and that the WWF expanded into a multi-million dollar business with worldwide influence. This was also the time that McMahon faced a great deal of backlash from within the industry for his "barnstorming" business practices while maintaining a relatively low mainstream media profile. This led to the entry of Ted Turner into the wrestling business in 1988. However, McMahon remained "just an announcer" within a context of the WWF product onscreen. I will discuss this era in greater detail but there are no examples that provide us with an example of "crisis."

I intend to focus the examination with the various image crises that McMahon has encountered that have threatened both his public image and his business. These situations called for him to explain, justify, or apologize for his and the company's actions. The first major media scandal that McMahon endured involved sex abuse and drug allegations arising in early 1992. Subsequently, McMahon was federally prosecution for steroid distribution and went to trial in 1994. This put McMahon in a greater spotlight as a corporate figure though he remained solely an announcer in his character on WWF programming.

An extensive part of my analysis will deal with the late 1990s period that saw McMahon evolve onscreen as "Mr. McMahon." He progressed from an announcer who never acknowledged his ownership to the colorful persona of the dastardly owner attempting to thwart more popular wrestlers' ways. However, during this time, he dealt with a second series of corporate crises— dealing mostly with the company's "Attitude" campaign. The death of performer Owen Hart also cast his ethics under question. Yet McMahon managed to maintain his product's popularity through these times while encouraging the hatred of WWF fans onscreen with the character that shares his name.

Most importantly, with his position as WWF chairman readily acknowledged onscreen, Vince McMahon has gained notoriety as a public figure. This has led to mixed proclamations. Some have questioned his morals and business practices. Some fans, while perhaps taking to disliking his character, have proclaimed him a "creative genius" and as the man most responsible for professional wrestling's greatest success.

ENACTMENT OF METHODS

It is a daunting task to blend too many theories in attempting to analyze text. In order to answer the questions as outlined, the process must extend beyond the dissection of the discourse. The dissection identifies strategies but does not provide a view on the values implicated.

I intend to focus on corporate apologia to parse McMahon's texts. I will explicate further on Benoit's (1997) model for image restoration discourse and explain how I can apply this to five areas of discourse in McMahon's career. This will be somewhat informed, but not heavily influenced by narrative criticism. The method in which

McMahon frames an incident— how he tells a story— will be given consideration in terms of categorizing his strategies with Benoit's framework.

However, before identifying the selected discourses and explicating the approach, I will discuss the historical elements that created the various situations in McMahon's career. This includes a discussion of professional wrestling and its origins. It is important to establish how the arena of entertainment that McMahon found himself in came to present itself. In the wrestling performance, McMahon often exaggerates what are perceived to be the negative traits of his corporate performance in order to improve his company's product. Yet this comes at the risk of potentially hurting his public corporate image—which he defends vociferously in interviews. He has managed to build a following of admirers despite, or perhaps because of, a rather aggressive communication style. In an era of "edgier" multimedia entertainment, McMahon may well be emblematic of how many North Americans wish that they could conduct themselves. This is speculation worthy of inquiry.

The prospect of dissecting McMahon's discourse and image is indeed a daunting one. It is made more difficult by the changing expectations that surround the business that he is in. An increase in media attention on professional wrestling has made the name "Vince McMahon" more recognizable than it ever has been before. It is with future study that I seek to discover just what that name means to those who hear it, and what it might mean in his uncharted future.

RISE TO POWER: A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING AND VINCE MCMAHON

> Both [the WWF and WCW] cheat their fans. That's the way of the wrestling promoter.
> ("Superfan", rec.sport.pro-wrestling, January 1, 1997).

> If we look at wrestling as fake, then we're judging it for trying to be something that it's not intended to be. It is not a sporting competition. It is an exhibition. But would we refer to a performance of *Hamlet* as fake? No. Wrestling is drama.
> (Gerald Morton, Mortense, 1998).

The fans come to the arena with signs, shirts and chants designed to show support for their favorite characters. The card reads like a series of athletic competitions. Yet no one comes to a professional wrestling match to see a sporting event. The World Wrestling Federation, under the watchful eye of Vince McMahon, begins each of its televised products by decreeing itself: "The revolutionary force in sports *entertainment*."

Wrestling is one of history's most cyclical businesses and oldest professions. Once presented as a legitimate sport, the "sports entertainment" tag is now used as its calling card. Once considered the bastion of pure competition, it emerged in the eyes of many as a shady world of "cons." Professional wrestling has transformed from "on the level" to "fake" to a point in history where it seems irrelevant whether or not the results are predetermined.

Vince McMahon is the impresario over this new landscape of professional wrestling. As president of the World Wrestling Federation, and recently as chairman, he has encountered several challenges. He has seen his company reach the heights of financial success. He has also experienced times where he and his company's reputation have been called into question. His effect on wrestling and its impact on how he has

conducted his business are undeniable. Under his watch, the World Wrestling Federation transformed from a moderately successful regional business to a worldly recognized entertainment entity. Yet he has struggled mightily to re-define how people see his professional wrestling product.

In order to properly understand Vince McMahon as a unique rhetorical figure, it is important to understand the unique business that he operates within. Professional wrestling is merely a scripted formed of entertainment. Or is it? It is hard to tell by taking a look at those fans that bring their signs and taunt the wrestlers with their cheers and jeers. Do they see wrestling as "real" or do they merely enjoy being part of the act?

It may be impossible to provide an exact answer to these questions. To have a better perspective, one must look at wrestling's evolution to the grand spectacle that the WWF presents today. Some sports have gone through very little change in their histories. For example, the rules to baseball have modified slightly over the years but the basic premise of the sport remains.

The premise of wrestling has changed a great deal. These changes perhaps reflect a change in the audience that has viewed it. Many of the changes are reflective of the vision of McMahon. He has defined his product as "sports entertainment" rather than "wrasslin'" (Off the record, July 28, 1999). The issue of wrestling as a sport or as a pseudo-soap opera leaves a critic to ask, "just what is professional wrestling anyway?" and more succinctly, "why is it so important?"

First of all, professional wrestling is worthy of rhetorical analysis on the basis of its unique presentation. "Because the game is structured around their active participation *as* fans, the spectators are always visible and, at least superficially, empowered in the

wrestling event" (Mazer, 1998, p. 6). Having a job in professional wrestling means you will receive the *immediate* feedback that the theater provides with the grand scope of a television audience watching as well. There may be no form of entertainment in which the appearance and results are more shaped and molded by audience interaction, as Mazer continues to demonstrate:

> The action slows in the ring for a moment, becomes repetitive, static. The fans stand together and take up the chant: "Bor-ring!" In response, the wrestlers immediately accelerate: a wrestler bodyslams his opponent and then catapults to the top rope...satisfied that they've been heard, the fans settle back into their seats (p. 154).

This could never happen in a movie or a television show because the audience would not be present to help dictate the action. The crowd may have a similar effect in the sporting arena, but there is no predetermined ending for the participants of that practice to reach. Wrestling combines the elements of both to create a unique pseudo-reality not seen in any other form of entertainment.

Two important subjects of rhetorical analysis as described by Brummett (1994) are *power* and *signs*. Signs can hold three types of meaning: indexically, iconically and symbolically (p. 7). Wrestling is a particularly interesting subject to analyze because of its changing indexical meaning. Indexical meaning is best described as "meaning by association." The meaning of wrestling, as a historical recap of it will demonstrate, has changed over time. The association of wrestling with carnys or "fakes" is something that still lingers for some today. Whatever the meaning to the audience, though, wrestling has survived to this day despite some turbulent lows. This indicates that it does have a very strong meaning to a vast number of North Americans.

Vince McMahon is an important subject of analysis because he has held the most power in the spectrum of professional wrestling since he purchased the WWF in 1982. McMahon has always been identified as *the* leader of the WWF even after he surrendered official leadership of the company to his wife in 1994. He is considered to be the single greatest creative influence on the present-day wrestling product. It is interesting to see how McMahon has handled this role throughout his career.

One's public image can be tarnished if s/he is perceived to be *too* powerful. Some may view McMahon as an individual with too much control in his industry. Yet the power that McMahon holds may also be reflective of the values of North American society. Professional wrestling has emerged as a site of masculine values: assertiveness, aggression, and sometimes ribald sexual fantasy. Examining both it and McMahon's evolution, a critic sees these values take on a greater level of importance.

I will discuss the history of professional wrestling and of McMahon's career as a promoter. I will first outline the act of professional wrestling. I will then discuss the history of wrestling as it evolved from competition to a carnival presentation to its own genre of arena entertainment. I will then outline McMahon's entrance into the business, the drastic changes that came afterwards, and the challenges that he faced along the way.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING?

The entertainment industry of professional wrestling is not to be confused with the sport of wrestling. Kurt Angle (an Olympic gold medallist in 1996) is a rare example of an amateur wrestler who has gone on to great success in pro wrestling. Otherwise, there is no correlation to be drawn between the two save that both involve displays of great athleticism.

A professional wrestling match brings two or more wrestlers together to act out a competitive physical conflict (usually in a roped area similar to a boxing ring). As in boxing, terms of "competition" are announced (e.g. "the following contest is scheduled for one fall and has a ten minute time limit") and a ring announcer declares a final decision. While the results are predetermined, it is usually up to the wrestlers to create the sequence of moves that leads to the planned conclusion. The objective, in the storyline, is usually for a character to pin an opponent's shoulders to the mat of three. There are other kinds of matches in which this is not the case (e.g. a cage match in which the first person to escape the cage wins).

Yet the greater focus in professional wrestling is on the series of characters that engage in these matches. A televised wrestling show consists of not only matches but also interviews and dramatic scenarios to establish personalities. All of these events are woven together into one continuous storyline throughout a promotion. A current WWF program is likely to feature very little in-ring action in comparison to the other elements presented: commentary, interviews with characters and scenarios in which these characters interact to form storyline developments.

The focus of the WWF product is to entertain. Not every match or scenario is presented in a strictly serious light. It attempts to incorporate humor: various characters parody each other's mannerisms. The WWF's year-in-review program in 2001 reflected such lists as "top five kisses" and "top food moments."

It is especially important to note that the majority of the televised role players in the genre of wrestling are male. WWF commentator Jerry Lawler simply states: "It's a *male* soap opera" (Mortense, 1998). There are a small number of females who wrestle

but the majority plays a "sex symbol" role of some sort. For example, the organization will often present such "contests" as "bra and panties" matches or "gravy bowl" matches in order to capitalize on their sex appeal. Among the many WWF videos that sell very well in the sports/entertainment category is a series entitled "WWF Divas." These videos feature WWF women posing in swimsuits in exotic climes-- much like the "Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue."

The WWF presents its product on cable and network television (TNN and UPN) but it also presents monthly pay-per-view events. The matches at these events are usually considerably longer than at televised events. The idea, it seems, is to entice wrestling fans with storylines and "mini-matches" with a longer match occasionally thrown in. This is designed to encourage fans to spend money on the pay-per-event where major grudges between the characters will come to a head.

It was many decades ago-- before the days of television-- when wrestling presented as a competitive affair and the sports sections actually reported match results. The emphasis of the viewer was to see who was the greater grappler or who was the stronger. The change in this focus was a gradual one. An historian must go back almost a century to track the decline of wrestling as a legitimate competition.

Professional Wrestling: Simply Sport

Wrestling is considered by many historians to be the oldest sport in history. Yet it is difficult to discern who wrestled, who won, and who lost in its origins. Morton and O'Brien (1985) note that people trying to trace the exact root of wrestling accurately are likely only fooling themselves:

> The origins of wrestling are lost in prehistory. The fact poses problems...which the writer should consider while exercising poetic license...How far back can the sport be traced? The playful tussling of animals encourages anthropomorphic speculation on the one hand. On the other, even today remnants of prehistoric toemism are found when wrestlers and other athletes assume epithets from the animal kingdom (p. 5).

Hieroglyphics from both the Greek and Egyptian eras indicate that wrestling was a very popular sport in ancient times. Some may assume that the exaggerated drama and violence of today's wrestling is unique to its era. Yet these drawings indicate that opponents engaged in psychological warfare to accompany the grappling; with language accompanying the holds reading such things as "I will make you bow before the Pharaoh" (Mortense, 1998).

From a rhetorical standpoint, it bears observing that wrestling's competitive era was not entirely marked by the fine art of grappling. The archetype of brutish masculinity is as rooted in early wrestling as are the demonstrations of holds. A more violent version of wrestling was presented by the Greeks in "pankration": a no-holds-barred form of combat on a watered down ground. Yeager (1979) describes this as "so savage that it was steadfastly avoided by Milon of Croton, who lived in the sixth century B.C. and was the most famous of all ancient Greek wrestlers" (p. 128).

The object-related violence of today's wrestling cannot be seen in this drawings but such acts as eye-gouging, pinching, hairpulling, elbowing and biting are all illustrated (Morton & O'Brien, p. 10). To a certain degree, these drawings resemble a classic schoolyard fight: Young men gathered around to observe two peers resort to any lengths to demonstrate *dominance*. In these drawings, one can see technique taking a backseat to that very masculine virtue.

As the centuries went on, many famous and dignified figures took up the sport of wrestling. In the United States, this included several former presidents. George Washington, William Taft, Zachary Taylor and Andrew Jackson all engaged in some form of wrestling in their lives (Mortense, 1998). However, the most famous wrestling president is Abraham Lincoln. He was a local free-for-all champion. According to Morton and O'Brien (1985), he "engaged in about three hundred matches from 1828 on until politics denied him the time to continue wrestling" (p. 20).

A variety of freestyle and greco-roman wrestling events met with success in the late-1800s. However, the popularity of competitive wrestling hit a zenith in the early stages of the 20th century. "The Russian Lion" George Hackenschmidt came to America in 1905 to compete in freestyle wrestling. His repertoire of maneuvers was limited but in terms of physical development, he was unparalleled. He was an "instant sensation" in the U.S. but also a viable international star (Mortense, 1998).

In this time, the path to professional wrestling's "shadiness" began to emerge. Continued misunderstandings foreshadowed the problems that would plague promoters' reputations for generations to come. Those who ran the sport were not held in high esteem and there did not seem to be a strong semblance of organization:

> There was a confusion of styles, rules, titles. Promotion was in the hands of individuals interested primarily profits who had learned their trade in the theater...from the beginning the search for a clear, clean line between sport and show in professional wrestling is in vain, for there was none. The very success of wrestling in its early days stilted its maturation into a modern professional sport (Morton & O'Brien, 1985, p. 37).

It is in this era that one can see the indexical meaning of professional wrestling change. Brummett (1994) identifies that a sign has two parts: a signifier and the

signification or meaning. The promoters were-- and are-- the ultimate signifiers of power in wrestling. They signed the matches and ultimately decided who would receive the shots at the prestigious titles. The *signification* of what a wrestling promoter began to transform. Rather than observed as "legitimate", they were perceived as shifty and self-interested. Even before the matches became "fixed", the integrity of their business was being called into question. It is then perhaps in this era that one can observe a rhetorical challenge that would plague Vince McMahon in its embryonic stages.

The beginning of the end of any semblance of competition occurred in the legendary Hackenschmidt-Frank Gotch wars. The two wrestled twice for the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) heavyweight championship; Gotch emerged victorious in both encounters. The latter bout, held in Chicago, drew a then-remarkable $87,000 in gate receipts. The significance lay not in the results but in the alleged chicanery of the otherwise accomplished Gotch.

Hackenschmidt claimed that Gotch had only won the first bout (in 1908) because he had oiled up his body to escape holds with ease (Betts, 1974). Gotch then reportedly hired German grappler Ed Santel to cripple Hackenschmidt in a training session. Santel followed through and Hackenschmidt was at far less than hundred percent for the rematch held in 1911. Gotch won easily.

Legitimate competition continued for several more years but the word of these illicit tactics spread. Already, wrestling was struggling with the image of being "fake." The chicanery did not impress those who had viewed wrestling as the ultimate one-on-one battle. Interest in the long-winded struggles of "real" wrestling died out.

The true future of professional wrestling had actually been developing under

"real" wrestling's reign all along. This future was in the carnival.

From the "At Show" to the Goldust Trio

The theatrical element of North American professional wrestling could be found in full force in the carnivals and circuses from the 1880s to the 1910s. "Carny" owners, including the infamous P.T. Barnum, created fictitious characters for wrestlers to pique the audience's interest. It was not the lure of competition but rather the allure of the flamboyant characters that attracted spectators' attention (of the characters were and even put out challenges to audience members. Wrestling became a popular staple as a carnival sideshow; otherwise known as "at(hletic) shows" (Wilson, 1959).

The conclusions to matches were pre-arranged. Wrestlers demonstrated holds but there was no intent to cripple or to compete. Yet many shows called for challenges to the audience. For these situations, "carnies" employed "hookers"-- highly capable wrestlers who could "hook" an opponent into a crippling hold-- to dispose of any local tough man (Mortense, 1998).

Interest in legitimate competition may have been fading but an ambitious group of entrepreneurs saw opportunity in the carnival element: Chicago's "Goldust Trio" of manager Billy Sandow, promoter Toots Mondt and wrestler Ed 'Strangler' Lewis. Mondt popularized the wrestling "card" that still exists today: a package of various matches rather than simply one feature bout. He felt that these matches had to be shorter and more performance-oriented-- as carnival encounters were-- in order to keep the fans attention (Griffin, 1937). Titles were established nation-wide to create interest in wrestling matches.

"Strangler" Lewis was arguably the business' most capable wrestler but he would occasionally "lose" the "world title" in scripted contests to men that he could actually very easily defeat. The idea was to keep fans interested in the title scene so that they would continue to buy tickets. Matches were "choreographed" so that fans would see a variety of holds and scenarios as opposed to a potentially hours-long contest with one hold remaining locked on. Ironically, this very same style would lead to Lewis angrily stating upon retirement: "If you put on a good scientific match, they (the wrestling fans) walked out. They want to see slamming" (New York Times, 1966).

This represents yet another stage in the evolution of power in professional wrestling. A competitive wrestling match might be nothing more than one individual locking another into a crippling hold and maintaining it until victory was achieved. The true potential for power and for dominance in both competitors was not evident. Mazer (1998) describes the importance of the "structured give-and-take" of choreographed wrestling match:

> On the surface, what is performed, what an audience sees, is a range of masculine identities in which the virtuous man can be recognized by the way in which he plays by the rules and courts the audience's approval, and victory always equals masculinity. By definition, it is always the best man who wins. But in the structured give-and-take of the match, every man gets a chance to demonstrate his potential for victory (p. 5).

Hard times would soon hit this "slamming style." Fans were not yet wise to the fact that matches were "fixed." The theatrical element would soon need escalation as the illusion of competition was about to undergo a serious challenge.

A Violation of Kayfabe and the Advent of Television

The promoters believed that the illusion of competition was important to sell. Despite the pre-arranged finishes, wrestling was still reported in the sports pages. The business operated under the code of "kayfabe." This term is most simply explained by retired referee Glen Parks: "wrestling's not fixed" (Dolin, 1999). The law of kayfabe dictated that those involved in wrestling were to never publicly speak of it being "fixed" or "scripted."

Yet Jack Pfeffer, embittered by an exclusion from an influential ring of New York promoters, exposed wrestling secrets to some friends in the media (Thesz & Bauman, 2001). He eventually made peace with his fellow promoters (Gallico, 1934) but the damage was done. The fans lost faith in wrestling. One press agent, in a drunken stupor, sent out results to a wrestling card the night *before* the card took place. Attendance dropped drastically as the audience clued in that wrestling was "fake."

Not all was lost though. The 1940s brought wrestling a godsend in the form of television. Television was in need of cheap programming to propel its use. Wrestling fit the bill.

This served to increase the theatrics of wrestling. Characters became more exaggerated: particularly the villains. The "babyfaces" (heroes) were traditionally presented simply as clean-cut, hard working athletes with no defining "character" to speak of. Lou Thesz and Verne Gagne were exemplars of an early-television-era "babyface." It was the "heels" (villains) that garnered the fan interest. These outrageous characters drew fans' ire: making them more likely to pay to see the villains receive their comeuppance.

In particular, the effeminate Gorgeous George and the outlandish "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers were perfect for the new medium (Jares, 1974). They played upon class issues- speaking to fans as though they were beneath them in dignity. George engaged in a serious of pre-match routines designed to work fans into a frenzy before a single hold was applied (pp. 20-21). A valet and a servant would accompany him. They would ensure that his sequined robe would not be ruffled upon removal. If the referee were to touch his duds, the servant would obediently dust it.

The insertion of a crucial media form had a lasting impact on wrestling. Until the advent of television, the actual viewing of a wrestling event fell outside of the media spectrum. Radio did nothing for wrestling and newspapers could only report the results. With television, a new significance was attached to wrestling.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) state that the analysis of a media presentation is largely based on identifying themes that unite storyline points. "Rhetorical analysis...examines the internal logic of content: What are the rules, forms, thematic unities, ways of storytelling found in content" (pp. 31-32). In this case, the one very clear underlying theme that emerged in the first television era of wrestling was "good" vs. "evil." A clear cast of characters represented the "thematic unity". Promoters and announcers decided much of who was "good" and "evil".

The level of success they attained depended greatly on the majority of the audience agreeing with their assessment. One "rule" of content was that matches between fellow "babyfaces" or fellow "heels" did not occur with the same frequency as babyface-heel encounters, if they occurred at all. Much like in comic books, a clear and identifiable line was drawn between who the audience was expected to cheer for and for

whom they were expected to jeer. It now no longer mattered if some fans knew that wrestling was "fake"; it was an enjoyable athletic theatrical presentation. Fans got caught up in their emotions towards the various characters and what they felt those characters represented.

The subsiding of the "better than" issue is best described by Roland Barthes (1972). In his analysis of wrestling, originally written in the early 1950s, he identifies the importance that value plays in the presentation of wrestling and how this presentation is a reconstructed reality:

> A wrestler can irritate or disgust, he never disappoints, for he always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him...this grandiloquence is nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality. What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction (p. 25).

In order to fully realize "reality", promoters still maintained "kayfabe." Ball (1990) notes that "the early days of professional wrestling found more money changing hands and more belief in wrestling as a legitimate sport" (p. 118). In the mid-20th century, promoters adhered to this philosophy. They wanted to maximize the "suspension of disbelief" in spectators. Commentators still stressed the value of being a "good wrestler." For example, Gordon Solie would describe wrestling as a "game of human chess" and would compare the amount of body contact in a professional wrestling match to that of a NFL football game.

Wrestling continued on throughout the 1970s as a strong regional business. Promoters staked their own territories and occasionally shared talent in order to keep each

area vibrant (Mortense, 1998). For example, the American Wrestling Association-- fronted by wrestler Verne Gagne-- dominated the midwest area of the United States. Stu Hart's Stampede Wrestling outfit ran cards across western Canada. Vince McMahon, Sr.'s WWF was based in the northeastern U.S. The strongest organizing body in wrestling was the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA). NWA members would promote regionally but collectively recognize a single "World champion." The WWF even participated as an NWA member for a twelve-year period (Keith, 2001).

Co-operation and "kayfabe" would be shaken to their core when Vincent K. McMahon, Jr. purchased his father's company.

Vince McMahon and the Ascent of the WWF

Vince Kennedy McMahon Jr. was born in Pinehurst, North Carolina, on August 24, 1945. By his account, he endured a stormy and abusive childhood. His parents were divorced and he rarely got along with his various stepfathers. He also struggled with dyslexia (he states "even today I can't spell") and was the first cadet to be court-martialed in the history of Fishburne Military School (Rosellini, 1999).

It was not until the age of 12 that McMahon finally met his biological father. This meeting would lead McMahon Jr. to the profession that would make him a multimillionaire. McMahon became very close to his father and he developed an interest in the professional wrestling business. His father gave him promotional duties in Maine in the early-1970s. By the mid-1970s, he was hired as a replacement announcer for the WWF. When McMahon Sr. retired in 1982, he sold Capitol Wrestling Corporation (parent to the WWF) to his son. McMahon Jr. renamed the organization Titan Sports and began breaking the territorial boundaries his father had observed. He later stated "my

father would never have sold me the territory if he knew what I was going to do with it" (Off the record, 1998).

McMahon did not break the law to get to the top but he broke a lot of unwritten codes. Rather than focusing his company on one area of the country, the WWF began to produce syndicated television shows for the United States and beyond. McMahon upgraded the quality of television production and went on an unprecedented "shopping spree": signing top draws across the country to his promotion. For example, Roddy Piper was once a popular draw in both the Oregon area and the Georgia area. By 1984, he was a WWF star wrestling in both these areas and all over the country. These tactics ruffled the feathers of regional promoters who watched their major stars defect at an alarming rate. AWA founder Verne Gagne states that "(McMahon) just went into every area and was able to just pick and choose the talent" (Mortense, 1998).

An acquisition of a former WWF wrestler from Gagne's company turned out to be monumental. In 1983, Hulk Hogan was a top AWA draw. By the end of the year, he returned to the WWF and became champion in January 1984. He was on the road to superstardom. By 1985, McMahon was working with MTV and the WWF even briefly produced a cartoon program bearing Hogan's name. The WWF ran a program in place of NBC's *Saturday Night Live* once every two months.

Above all, wrestling was pushed as entertainment for the entire family, which expanded the business' audience. Matches became less bloody and more muscular wrestlers appeared to present a superhero image that would appeal to children. Magazines that still referred to wrestling as a sport (*Pro Wrestling Illustrated* and *The Wrestler*, for e.g.) would lament at the lack of "scientific talent" in the WWF. McMahon

was more interested in promoting size and muscle: emphasizing the elements that made the wrestlers seem truly larger-than-life.

The performers, especially Hogan, lived up to this as well. He preached the value of "training, prayer and vitamins" so as to seem a good role model. Yet when addressing his opponent, he would not speak of his technique in the ring but rather would talk about the superiority of "Hulkamania." The term had developed in the AWA but in the WWF, it acquired an almost supernatural element. Hogan would not bother to discuss wrestling but rather how this force could overcome any evil in its path.

Wrestling had always featured over-the-top characters, but McMahon placed an emphasis on producing television vignettes to further illustrate characters' persona outside of the wrestling arena. For example, it was not enough for viewers to see a Hillbilly Jim interview in the arena, the WWF ran sketches featuring the character in a farm setting. McMahon was certainly not the first promoter to do this but he was the first to do it on a regular basis.

McMahon also popularized the term "sports entertainment" to describe the WWF product. It was a subtle way of acknowledging that wrestling was not competitive but was nonetheless a worthy value of a parent's entertainment dollar. The WWF not only sold its product via television and videotape, but they marketed a wide array of clothing and toys in order to maximize licensing profits. In fact, the WWF was the first organization to make major use of copyright: creating characters for some wrestlers that they could not use once they left the promotion. McMahon also lobbied hard for deregulation of wrestling as a sport across the United States, not at all fearing whether or not this would violate "kayfabe" (Mazer, p. 3).

Explicating on the importance of power in meaning, Brummett (1994) states that all texts and meanings are "sites of struggle" (p. 70). In the case of McMahon, he attempted to divert the struggle of competing organizations and place all of the attention on his product. No longer would a TV viewer turn on his or her TV and hear a WWF announcer explain the complete past of a wrestler: only his WWF history existed. It becomes important to critique McMahon when one realizes the power that he has exercised power by restructuring-- some may argue re-creating entirely-- the narrative paradigm from within his characters operated. For many people becoming acquainted with the art form, "professional wrestling" were just different words for "the WWF." All other promotions were becoming incidental as indicated by a WWF power move in the summer of 1984.

"Black Saturday": The WWF's Competition Reels

The WWF itself was bigger than wrestling as a whole had ever been. With this came calls of outrage from opposition that claimed that McMahon's true desire was a wrestling monopoly. When he purchased Georgia Championship Wrestling in 1984-- and its TBS television slot-- the outrage grew (Molinaro, 2001). The difference in presentation was slight but revealed the direction that McMahon planned to take the product. John Molinaro (April 3, 2001) said of pre-WWF GCW broadcasts:

> each week Gordon Solie...welcomed millions of wrestling fans with his famous refrain: *When you see this symbol (pointing to an NWA emblem), you are assured of the optimum in professional wrestling.*

The first WWF-led GCW broadcast (July 14, 1984) came to be known as "Black Saturday" in wrestling circles. McMahon emphasized other elements of the product. He spoke of "giant-like 'Big' John Studd. He referred to the "most unusual" George "The

Animal" Steele. He played up the ethnicity of the Iron Sheik. These elements were not uncommon in professional wrestling but the WWF would downplay the competitive element of the characters more so than any promotion before it.

He also emphasized the value of presentation over wrestling itself. Despite the WWF's growing profile, it was not well greeted by TBS viewers. When asked to respond to this backlash, he did not make any allusions as to whether or not his company would feature better action or wrestling. He instead stated, "We'll show those complainers the difference between a major league and a minor league production, given time" (Molinaro, 2001).

A brief "Pro Wrestling USA" alliance designed to fight the WWF floundered quickly. Despite years of cable TV exposure on ESPN, the once mighty AWA floundered and eventually folded in 1991. NWA promoter Jim Crockett was the most dogged of McMahon's rivals. Running Jim Crockett Promotions (JCP) out of North Carolina, he engaged in a series of promotional salvos with McMahon. Falling out with Ted Turner, McMahon sold his TBS time to Crockett for $1 million in 1985 and reports circulated that he stated, "Crockett will choke on that million" (Schramm, 1998).

Crockett capitulated three years later and sold JCP to Turner. Despite JCP's financial losses, Turner wanted to maintain the high cable ratings that NWA wrestling provided. He renamed the promotion World Championship Wrestling (WCW). (The NWA would pull its recognition of WCW two years later. It revived itself as an organizing body of regional promotions in 1994.) Starting in 1989, McMahon's company would be competing with a subsidiary of Turner Broadcasting.

Another element worthy of analysis in relation to McMahon is his attempts to define himself outside of the wrestling genre. Consider the indexical meaning of "wrestling promoter" and one might label McMahon a "carny." He has instead described himself not as a wrestling promoter but as a "sports entertainment" entrepreneur. To study McMahon's presentation of wrestling is to study a complete reevaluation of terms. Wrestling was only wrestling until McMahon devised the "sports entertainment" moniker. So during the WWF's successful late-80s, early-90s run, he tried to attain financial success outside of the wrestling world. Aside from increasing revenues for Titan, this may have to been an attempt to demonstrate that the true allure of the WWF was not its wrestling but its entertainment value, which McMahon felt he could bring to any avenue of sport.

Titan Sports promoted a boxing pay-per-view in 1988 (Sugar Ray Leonard vs. Donny LaLonde) but chose not to pursue that avenue any further. A more embarrassing effort came from 1991 to 1993 as Titan launched the World Bodybuilding Federation. The WBF promised to "revamp professional bodybuilding with dramatic new events and the richest prize money in the history of the sport." The drama failed to develop as planned. Instead, McMahon and Titan were reported to have lost $15 million in the experiment (McGough, 1993).

Under Fire: Scandal Hits The WWF

The WWF continued to portray itself as family entertainment during the second "Golden Age of Professional Wrestling." This reputation remained relatively unchallenged despite some legal difficulties in the early stages of ascent-- most notably when WWF wrestler David Schultz assaulted 20/20 reporter John Stossel in 1984.

However, the 1990s would bring challenges to the WWF's "family friendly" reputation and would bring McMahon's persona into the forefront.

On June 27, 1991, Dr. George Zahorian was arrested for illegally distributing steroids to professional wrestlers. This sparked controversy about drug use in the WWF that would intensify by early-1992. Former wrestlers such as Schultz and "Superstar" Billy Graham began to level accusations of drug use against the WWF's major superstar: Hulk Hogan.

This was exacerbated by allegations of sexual abuse. Teenage ring boy Tom Cole threatened legal action against Titan Sports in early 1992 for sexual harassment from ring announcer and crew supervisor Mel Phillips. The floodgates opened. Several others made similar allegations towards McMahon and the WWF. Former female referee Rita Chatterton labeled accusations of sexual abuse directly at McMahon for an incident that allegedly occurred in 1986. Announcer Murray Hodgson claimed he was dismissed for refusing the sexual advances of WWF executive Pat Patterson. Former WWF referee Mike Clark and WWF wrestler Barry Orton also named Patterson and fellow executive Terry Garvin as performing in sexually abusive behavior (Skulski, 1992). Cole reached an out-of-court settlement with the WWF but no other legal actions were completed.

Wrestling legends such as Graham and Bruno Sammartino along with former performers such as Schultz and Billy Jack Haynes insisted that wrestling had become a haven of steroid abuse. McMahon's vision of the true-life superhero was now a lightning rod for criticism as reports speculated as to whether or not any of the wrestlers in the WWF could maintain their look without illegal assistance (Fitzpatrick, 1992).

What seemed to be the ultimate challenge occurred in 1994 as McMahon was put on trial for conspiracy to defraud the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The negative publicity had subsided at the point though; particularly as football legend O.J. Simpson's legal difficulties occurred as the trial proceeded. McMahon was acquitted with little fanfare as WWF attorneys insisted that the government was merely on a "witch hunt" for WWF property (Moushey, 1998). During this time, McMahon officially surrendered his role as WWF president to his wife, Linda.

These events are of specific rhetorical significance as they describe a very clear instance where image repair strategies are needed. Benoit (1997) states that

> The key to understanding image repair strategies is to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt such responses or instigate a corporate crisis. An attack has two components: 1) The accused is held responsible for an action. 2) That act is considered offensive (p. 178).

Quite clearly, McMahon was held responsible for a variety of unsavory activities in his organization. Both sexual abuse and drug use were considered to be distasteful to the public at large. These offenses also strayed from a specific narrative frame that he had put around his product: WWF entertainment was "clean" and safe for the whole family. McMahon's persona was put to the test as he normally shied away from being identified as anything other than a WWF announcer.

During the time between the scandal outbreak and the trial, the wrestling business had cooled. The WWF maintained a family-friendly image and continued to produce exaggerated characters. Doink the Clown was a literal example of the circus atmosphere that the WWF brought into its product. However, there were some slight changes as the

WWF was willing to let a distinctly non-superhero and less muscular character in Bret Hart spend some time as the company's top "babyface."

Business would gradually be revived by the acceleration of the WWF-WCW war. While the two had competed against each other, there had been little acknowledgment of one from the other in public media. That would change in the mid-1990s.

Monday Night Wars

Then-WCW vice-president Eric Bischoff acquired wrestling's most recognizable star, Hulk Hogan, in 1994. When this move failed to provide WCW with the edge over the WWF, Bischoff and TBS chair Ted Turner decided to take a bold and unprecedented step to increase the stakes. Turner Network Television (TNT) debuted *WCW Monday Nitro* on September 4, 1995. It was designed to run directly against *WWF Monday Night RAW* on USA network.

Throughout the late-1980s and early 1990s, the WWF maintained McMahon's narrative that it was its own world. If a wrestler had a past in another promotion, it was completely ignored. Interpromotional continuity in wrestlers' characters dwindled during this time and by the late 1980s, the WWF sought to "re-brand" most of the talent that came from another promotion.

For example, seven-time NWA champion Harley Race became "King" Harley Race and no mention was made of his NWA exploits. Former AWA champion Curt Hennig became "Mr. Perfect" and as far as the WWF universe was concerned, he had never held a title in his life. Only in 1993 did the WWF begin to openly acknowledge other promotions and work with them (regional outfits Smoky Mountain Wrestling and

United States Wrestling Association). WCW remained a taboo word on WWF programming.

Nitro ushered in a new era of trash talking between the two promotions. Bischoff, like McMahon, doubled as an announcer and delighted in taking shots at his rival promotion. *Nitro* was live every week whereas *RAW* was often taped. Bischoff would give away results to the entire *RAW* program at the top of a *Nitro* episode.

This era was a crucial turning point as McMahon opted to revamp the once "WWF-only" universe. In retaliation, the WWF produced a series of satire bits entitled "Billionaire Ted's Wrasslin' Warroom." "Billionaire Ted" was a spoof of Ted Turner--whose organization had recently merged with Time Warner. Other spoofs in the series were of WWF-turned-WCW stars such as Hulk Hogan ("the Huckster"), 'Macho Man' Randy Savage ("the Nacho Man") and 'Mean' Gene Okerlund ("Scheme Gene"). The series played out a very heavy-handed attitude towards Turner specifically. Bischoff replied by referring to the WWF as the "World Whining Federation" on *Nitro* (February 26, 2001).

The heated WWF-WCW war also presents an interesting and unique situation for rhetorical analysis: an attack that requires a defense. McMahon, whether inadvertently or not, had put many promoters out of business in his rise to the top. In attacking Turner's business strategies, McMahon called attention to his own almost-forgotten business strategies of the mid-1980s. In decreeing Turner's WCW efforts as "unfair business", he potentially called attention to his actions of the past. Therefore, differentiation was required in order to defend his actions while attacking those of his opponent. This is a rarely seen rhetorical dilemma.

Despite the WWF's efforts, WCW would nonetheless go on to take a commanding lead in the "Monday Night Wars." *Nitro* would outrate *RAW* for a period of one and a half years. During this time, McMahon's promotional philosophy changed. RAW expanded to two hours and the WWF slowly began to incorporate more violent overtones. The landmark storyline for WCW centered on the new World order (nWo). Despite being heels, the nWo became popular in its own right and the lines between "babyfaces" and "heels" were difficult to decipher from crowd reaction. This affected the WWF as well. The narrative paradigm of "family entertainment" was sacrificed in order to reflect the reality of the WWF audience.

"Stone Cold" Steve Austin gradually gained popularity despite the fact that the character was foul-mouthed, broke all the rules and showed little regard for anybody else. The WWF chose to turn Austin full-fledged "babyface" in 1997 despite its past reputation as a family-friendly organization. Austin did not fulfill the criteria of a well behaved role model but the WWF chose not to curb the character's violent behavior despite his new "babyface" status.

This was a hint of the direction the WWF product would soon take. A dramatic series of events would occur in the fall of 1997 would help accelerate this change.

The Montreal Screwjob

As 1997 progressed, the WWF gradually presented a more violent and sexually suggestive product. McMahon insisted that fans no longer wanted to have "their intelligence insulted" by the world of "good guys" and "bad guys" (Meltzer, 1997). This was much to the dismay of WWF wrestler Bret Hart, who had been with the company for 14 years. This difference in philosophy and the large monetary value of his 1996 contract

prompted a decision from McMahon to negotiate a release for Hart. What happened from that point would forever be known as the "Montreal screwjob."

After a series of discussions, the release was final and Hart signed with the rival WCW. However, Hart was the WWF champion at the time and still had 90 days to serve with the company. There were also details to his contract that made it a complicated procedure, as documented by a special issue of *Wrestling Observer* (1997) and by the film *Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows* (1998).

By November, news of Hart's eventual departure began to leak to various internet sources although it was largely portrayed as rumors at that point. Eric Bischoff added fuel to the fire by promising a "surprise" for an upcoming edition of *Nitro*. At that month's WWF pay-per-view event in Montreal, McMahon authorized a changed ending to a Hart-Shawn Michaels match despite Hart's claims that his contract allowed for "reasonable creative control" over his 90 departure days. McMahon wanted Michaels to win the match and the title but Hart had two objections. He did not want to lose the WWF title in Canada and he did not want lose the title to Michaels: a personal rival in the backstage area (Meltzer, 1997).

Hart came to an agreement with McMahon to simply forfeit the belt on television the night after the pay-per-view. He wrestled the match with the impression that there would be a disqualification or "schmazz" ending (Jay, 1998). Instead, McMahon authorized a changed ending to the script.

As Michaels locked Hart in a submission hold, both referee Earl Hebner and McMahon called for the bell. This was to present the idea that the finish of the match was Hart's submission. Yet Hart was in the process of reversing the hold when the bell

rang, and he seemed genuinely confused. Michaels visibly expressed dismay at his "victory", grabbed the WWF title belt and later denied to Hart backstage that he took part in the changed ending. Hart and McMahon engaged in a physical confrontation over the issue that night. McMahon emerged with a black eye and Hart claimed to have punched his employer in the face (Jay, 1998).

Hart's WCW arrival was made public the following night on *Nitro*. McMahon's immediate rationale for the changed script was:

> that he had to do it because he couldn't take the chance of Hart going to WCW without giving back the belt and he couldn't let Bischoff go on television the next night and announce Hart was coming while he was still (WWF) champion and said how it would kill his business (Meltzer, 1997).

Once again, image restoration discourse was necessary. McMahon's image was under question as many pointed out that this demonstrated him as an untrustworthy employer. WWF wrestler Mick Foley, who later became a major star in the company's revival, nearly resigned over the incident, openly stated "You don't do that to a guy like Bret Hart." Several wrestlers threatened to boycott the Monday night WWF show in defense of Hart although few ultimately acted on this (Foley, 1999, pp. 451). While Hart's younger brother Owen remained in the WWF, his two brother-in-laws (Jim Neidhart and Davey Boy Smith) also departed for WCW.

This situation is unique to wrestling as McMahon's actions had consequences in two different "arenas." Firstly, he was left to defend his actions against an employee in his organization. Secondly, he and his creative team were left to acknowledge the situation and work their storylines around it.

If television producers fired a popular actor, the image crisis could perhaps be attributed as strictly organizational. If these same producers took a character in a direction that the audience did not like, this crisis might be considered creative. The Bret Hart scandal was an interesting combination of both as fans did not "buy" that the *character* Bret Hart quit so McMahon needed to address his actions both as an employer but within the scripted world as well. He chose to develop a heel character in order to take advantage of the notoriety of his actions even as he attempted to paint those same actions as noble in the "real world." It is an interesting rhetorical crux: playing up the negativity of one's actions in one spectrum while maintaining the positivism of the actions in another.

Revitalization: WWF "Attitude"

Hart's WCW career would be lackluster but the WWF began a meteoric rise shortly after his departure thanks largely to the publicity around the pay-per-view *Wrestlemania XIV* (featuring then-barred boxer Mike Tyson) and the ascent of Austin as a nationally recognized superstar. McMahon's heel character of "Mr. McMahon" became Austin's foil. He attempted to thwart Austin's every move as WWF champion. He even came complete with "yes-men" cronies. The villainization of McMahon in the Montreal saga added a sense of realism to the character. The Austin-McMahon feud would become the central storyline in the WWF revival.

The company had launched fully into a more violent era heavily influenced by Extreme Championship Wrestling: a company that it had done co-operative work with since late 1996. Wrestlers began taking nastier falls. The use of female sex symbolism escalated. The use of suggestive language became commonplace. The increase of sexual

allusions was especially noticeable. A character known as the Godfather began coming to the ring accompanied by women known only as the "hoes." Female characters Sable and Debra teased full nudity on occasion.

The masculinity of wrestling had never been more apparent. It is within a masculine paradigm of narrative that McMahon has established his largest fanbase. It is difficult to discern whether or not these masculine values are representative of what North Americans want, expect, or admire in the corporate world. It is obvious that this display of values does appeal somehow to a very large fanbase. The WWF "Attitude" era brought resuscitation to what had been a flagging business.

Women of professional wrestling have always existed to provide contrast to the males. In the "Attitude" era, they play rougher but still they often do it in more ridiculous realms, such as the aforementioned "gravy bowl" or "bra and panty" encounters. Women who dare to steer away from sex symbolism are usually villainized. For example, WWF superstar Chyna was a prominent heel in the pre-"Attitude" era because of her decidedly masculine looks. Over the course of her WWF career (1996-2001), she underwent several cosmetic surgeries to increase her femininity and thus her popularity. She concluded her WWF career as a *Playboy* cover girl, boosting the sales of that magazine.

It is within this "male soap opera" universe that McMahon thrives and the same audience that observes this product observe his "true-life" corporate persona. Thus the dichotomy of "businessman-maverick" continues to present itself, but McMahon always possesses the important element of *power*. He is not shy about portraying his role in the public sphere.

McMahon and the WWF launched an ad campaign in January 1999 to capitalize on the new WWF "Attitude." The campaign was entitled "Get It?" It was designed to expound upon McMahon's belief that the WWF was more than "wrasslin." The ad made reference to "action-adventure" and poked fun at the sexual suggestive and violence of the product. McMahon embraced the controversy surrounding his company's new direction in a *New York Magazine* editorial:

> We engage in controversy with a sense of fun and yes, naughtiness...the (ad) was entertainment with a capital "E."...lofty politicians, out of touch, moral crusaders who don't have a clue and egghead professors with flimsy studies treat the common man with contempt. They think our fans must have their viewing decisions made for them. We treat our audience with respect for its likes and dislikes and they know it. (p. 4).

The WWF's fortunes continued to rise into 1999. With revenues increasing, McMahon and his wife Linda prepared to take the company public as World Wrestling Federation Entertainment. Then a tragic incident put the Hart-McMahon feud back into the media and threatened his reputation again.

Tragedy in Kansas City and Trouble with "Attitude"

On a May 23rd pay-per-view very sadly and ironically entitled *Over the Edge*, WWF performer Owen Hart died in a failed stunt. He was to have been lowered from the ceiling of Kemper Arena via a harness as the masked mockery of a heroic character known as the Blue Blazer. Difficulties with the harness caused him to slip and descend, and he passed away shortly thereafter. The WWF announced the death to the television viewers, did not address it to the live audience, and the show continued.

A verbal tussle soon emerged between McMahon and Owen's widow Martha. The WWF aired clips of the funeral on *RAW*. Martha claimed that she had specifically

instructed McMahon not to proceed with this action. *The Calgary Sun* acted as a referee, publishing the two's various accounts of events (D'Amour, June 2, 1999).

Public relations were made even tenser by a lawsuit from ex-WWF performer Rena Mero claiming "negligence, breach of contract, unfair trade practices and intentional infliction of emotional distress." She claimed that the WWF wanted her to participate in a lesbian storyline, expose her breasts on TV and appear in sexually degrading photos" (June 4, 1999). This would be settled out of court.

The WWF courted more controversy by signing former employee and then governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura to appear at the WWF pay-per-view *SummerSlam '99*. This raised questions about the ethics of a major corporation doing business with a publicly elected official. Ventura had previously been critical of McMahon and of the Owen Hart incident. He had also engaged in litigation with the WWF in the early 1990s. It seemed that McMahon was "buying off" one of his vocal critics in a time of public crisis.

The indexical meaning of wrestling had changed drastically by this point and McMahon's power provided the image restoration challenge. Since his onscreen character had made light of his powerful position within the company, McMahon was left to defend the company as responsible. Yet it was still desirable for him to portray the "maverick" attitude that new WWF viewers had espoused to.

The WWF made efforts to increase its image as a responsible organization. It launched a public campaign against "backyard" wrestling. It also launched the website wwfparents.com as a "family-friendly" form of advertisement for the company's product. The website also highlights charitable work of WWFE and its employees. Still, this

website remains a separate entity from the main WWF website, which is still a representative of the ribald WWF "Attitude."

The WWF's success continued despite an eventual lawsuit from Martha Hart that kept the incident in the public eye in 2000. In 2001, Hart and WWFE came to a settlement. As a public entity, World Wrestling Federation Inc. thrived with McMahon as its chair. Rival organization WCW suffered from organizational difficulties and continued dissent from wrestlers. The product no longer influenced the WWF but vice-versa as WWF writer Vince Russo joined WCW to try to turn things around. The company's state only worsened.

With WCW on the verge of collapse, the WWF had a stranglehold on the wrestling market. So WWFE attempted its most ambitious project outside of that field.

WCW Crumbles, XFL Fumbles

In February 2000, Vince McMahon announced that WWFE was to launch a football league titled the XFL in 2001. There was initial laughter at the notion. The news had a negative effect on WWFE stock. Yet the National Broadcasting Corporation took a fifty percent stake in the venture only a month later. This ensured major network television coverage for the league in its inception.

A great deal of media attention surrounded the ribald nature of entertainment that McMahon promised would accompany the XFL. Advertisements either featured scantily clad cheerleaders or promised the return of "smashmouth" football. The league was a ratings bonanza for one week (Fendrich, 2001). The decline was rapid and startling and the XFL became a resounding failure. The price for the WWF and its shareholders was

high as McMahon stated that losses after taxes would amount to about $35 million (Carlisle, 2001).

The folding of the XFL came shortly after WWFE purchased its rival organization. Fusient Media Ventures had announced a purchase of a majority interest in WCW in January 2001, but when TBS declined renewing WCW programming, the deal fell apart. WWFE purchased WCW for a mere $4 million. While this news was positive for WWFE shareholders, it presented another challenge to McMahon's public image. His critics had slammed him for being a monopolist; it now certainly seemed that he had this monopoly as ECW had filed for bankruptcy.

McMahon chose to acknowledge this aspect in his onscreen character. The WWF completed its purchase of WCW shortly before its final telecast on TNT. The WWF organized a simulcast for that night. *Nitro* and *RAW* ran a collective storyline about McMahon's WCW purchase. In the onscreen storyline, Vince gloated about the acquisition and speculated on which WCW wrestlers he might retain and which he might fire. He then decided that he would "bury" WCW, only to discover that his son Shane had actually "bought" WCW before he could. The storyline was designed to extend the Vince vs. Shane storyline into a "dream" WWF-WCW feud. In a press release immediately following the event (March 28, 2001), the company celebrated what it described as an "opportunity to build our talent roster and add more diversity and creativity to our storylines, further strengthening our core product."

Yet the financial boon many predicted was not to be. WWFE chose not to buy out the Time Warner contracts of several big WCW stars (Kevin Nash, Goldberg, Ric Flair, Sting, for example). The company retained "Diamond" Dallas Page and then-

WCW champion Booker T but the storyline fizzled. The company even incorporated the use of the ECW brand to resuscitate the angle. It was a temporary stopgap.

Despite the promise that WWFE would build WCW into a separate entity, the WWF-WCW storyline ended rather unceremoniously in November 2001. Some WCW performers became inactive. Some re-emerged in the WWF while others were reassigned to various "territories." Plans to "divide" the WWF into two entities recently began with the division of talent into an exclusively *RAW* (The National Network) roster and an exclusive *Smackdown* (UPN) roster. The WCW name has been shelved permanently but the WWF is using the nWo trademark to help create new stories.

Once again, the company is attempting to add a veneer of reality to its production. Wrestling critics believe that overuse of the nWo is a major reason that WCW eventually went out of business. Onscreen, the Mr. McMahon character wished to destroy the WWF because of his anger in sharing ownership with babyface Ric Flair. He enlisted the nWo to assist him on this mission.

The nWo website (http://nwo.wwe.com) proclaimed: "Mr. McMahon knows what these men can do: just as they put WCW out of business, they can do the same to the Federation." His character openly referred to "killing fan interest" with the nWo. It was of course the hope of the man behind the character that the exact opposite wouldf happen. Nonetheless, the shelf life of the nWo gimmick proved to be even shorter than that of the WCW "Invasion." The results were again disappointing. Ironically, the man who helmed WCW during the nWo era, Eric Bischoff, was immediately brought in as a "general manager" to add life to the storylines upon the nWo's demise. It has yet to be determined as of this writing whether or not that move can be considered a success.

CONCLUSION

Professional wrestling today is a far cry from the Egyptian hieroglyphics of two mortal men grappling for superiority. Yet the roots of Pankratean still affect the public arena that Vince McMahon constantly employs his rhetoric in. McMahon is as much expected to be a "tough guy" as he is expected to be a tough businessman as he flaunts his muscular physique in character onscreen.

Yet the WWF is more than just professional wrestling. As a male soap opera, the machinations of the characters take precedent over the action. The wrestler's personalities taking precedent over their abilities. The fans' desires sometimes taking precedent over logical storyline arches. McMahon and his company have amplified the caricatures and buffoonery developed in the television age. Music videos, merchandise and comedic sketches have become integral to his product.

So the power element, so crucially elevated in rhetorical significance by Brummett (1994), illustrates why McMahon is an important media figure to analyze. McMahon utilized his power to change the indexical meaning of what wrestling is. Wrestling's metamorphosis from sport to entertainment in the eyes of the public completed itself through its work.

Yet through it all, McMahon is still bound to the context of wrestling history. The aura of the slimy promoter has not fully dissipated. McMahon's image situations are placed in an odd light where he is thrust into the spotlight in the world of legitimate business despite making his profit from a business that many look down upon.

McMahon has addressed various audiences in his career. He has addressed his audience both as an announcer and as a character. His character has been designed to

exploit the negativity of his public image; Mr. McMahon is greedy, self-serving and arrogant. He has been accountable to stockholders. The Owen Hart tragedy and the XFL failure left he and CEO Linda McMahon in a difficult position in terms of justification.

He has addressed the media and often in an antagonistic way. The "get it?" campaign is an example of McMahon's efforts to persuade the media to engage his text in a different way. Hence, labels such as "sports entertainment" and "action adventure" emerge. The old-school promoters-- the Crocketts, Verne Gagne and even Vince McMahon Sr.-- would never have called their product anything but wrestling. McMahon wishes to be addressed by the media as part of a wider genre.

This is emblematic of the approach that McMahon would take towards his product for his entire career. In the 2000 documentary *Beyond the Mat*, he states "hopefully, (our success) will just serve as an entrée for people to see what we're really all about: We make movies."

Yet his claims that the WWF excels not just at wrestling, but entertainment in general, have been weakened by the stunning failures of the WBF and XFL. McMahon's form of media address and image management-- particularly when promoting the XFL-- was similar to his usual persona. He talked trash (calling NFL players "pantywaists") and promised a fan-friendly environment. He often conceives of the media as his enemy and he rallies the people to stand behind him in this fight. This may reveal a limitation to the success of McMahon's narrative paradigm. Is the McMahon that tried to push a new brand of football to America still too "carny" for the "legitimate" sports fan to take seriously, and will this challenge ever be resolved for McMahon?

McMahon has also been placed on the defensive and several of the aforementioned situations have required extensive image restoration and corporate defense. The 1992 allegations did little to threaten his image as a shrewd businessman but they did call his morality into question. Contrarily, the failure of his non-wrestling ventures has in fact put his competence in question. His business ethic (separate from his personal ethics) has also been a separate area of defense. Whereas he championed the method with which he built the WWF empire, he insisted that Ted Turner's methods were unsavory. This is despite the fact that many saw no difference.

If wrestling is an important subject to discuss because many people watch it, the question begs to be asked: Is Vince McMahon a man of the people? Is the masculine world of the WWF as real as the world that the audience steps into when they leave the arena? These queries cannot be answered by an historical recap but one thing is certain: McMahon and professional wrestling have faced a crux in public perception. Old-school promoters demanded their product be taken seriously even though their reputation was that of a "fake." On the other hand, McMahon has asked that wrestling be judged as nothing more than another form of glamorous entertainment, and that he simply be judged as an entertainment impresario.

The difference is that whereas promoters were concerned with the image of legitimacy of their product, McMahon has been more concerned with the image of presentation. Is the WWF product entertaining? More importantly, *do the fans enjoy it*? This is at the heart of the WWF chairman's mode of public presentation: Anyone that opposes he and his company opposes his public. Hence they do not "get it." If the public that watches the WWF truly is "his public", then the rhetorical significance of the product

may be inextricably tied to how he conducts himself when he is Vince McMahon, Jr. and not "Mr. McMahon."

STRATEGY IN ACTION: THE IMAGE RESTORATION OF VINCE MCMAHON

> The absolutive speech differs from the vindicative speech in that it is more specific than the latter. The *vindicative* address, due to the reliance upon transcendental strategies, permits the accused greater ease in going beyond the specifics of a given charge. Such an apology aims not only at the preservation of the accused's reputation, but also at the recognition of his greater worth as a human being relative to the worth of his accusers (Ware & Linkguel, 1973, p. 283).

My initial research question concerns how Vince McMahon conducts himself in situations where his or his company's reputations have been questioned. This question alone is the concern of the discourse analysis. Ware and Linkguel describe a distinct difference between the absolution of a public figure and his or her vindication in such a situation. This difference is presented in the early stages of apologia and image restoration studies. The implications of such a difference have yet to be fully discussed.

Vindication indicates that the rhetor is more inclined to go beyond the moral outrage of singular event deemed to be offensive. That act will instead be portrayed within a play of sorts. The rhetor seeks to create a tension between themselves and the accuser by portraying the accusation as acting within a larger framework of worth in society. Who is of greater worth to the audience at large: s/he or the accuser?

As president, and now chairman, of the World Wrestling Federation, he has been placed in a situation of image restoration on numerous occasions. The genre of entertainment that he presides over— professional wrestling— has often been considered the ultimate passion play of masculinity (Ball, 1990, Mazer, 1998). McMahon's strategy of public crisis may well lie in the differences between absolution and vindication. Such

a possibility cannot be certified until the boundaries of image restoration are fully explored.

I will discuss the various image restoration strategies as laid out by Benoit (1997). These strategies will be explained and detailed. Whereas Benoit places them within five categories, I argue that they can be further placed in two broad categories. These categories will be emblematic of two specific communication styles.

I will then analyze McMahon's discourse over a number of situations to observe which of these strategies are employed and how often. The common threads between these time periods will reveal the potential rhetorical significance of McMahon's unique evolution as a businessman and performer.

EXPLORING THE TERM *APOLOGIA*

In this analysis, I am not merely looking at the life or career of one man and attempting to see how he interacts with his public. Such a task would be daunting and perhaps not even worthwhile. What I am assessing is how McMahon communicates in a specific type of situation: situations where apologies are potentially expected.

Apologia is a rhetorical *genre*. Rhetorical criticisms citing a specific genre are criticisms designed to assess a situation that possesses a unique situation that can clearly be identified and labeled by an audience. Rowland (1991) states that a rhetorical genre's function as a "force that unifies [its] form and content" (p. 131) and that it acts as a "'logical principle' that accounts for its unique character (Downey, 1993, p. 43). Downey further states that "the function of a genre constitutes its meaning, or the way it is used in any given time to satisfy collective needs" (p. 43). In essence, a genre is a transparent rhetorical tool. By its own usage, it reveals the situation that the rhetor is in.

There are three considerations to be made before examining the apologia strategies of Vince McMahon. First, it is important to differentiate two areas of behavior that one can be accused of wrongdoing: moral/ethical offense and incompetence. Second, the importance of audience to the genre must be identified. Finally, Benoit's (1997) model provides five categories under which apologia can fall under— providing a map to potentially connect McMahon's actions from situation to situation. Ware and Linkguel (1973) make the claim that not only is apologia a genre of rhetoric, but it is in fact the "most enduring of rhetorical genres":

> The recurrent theme of accusation followed by apology is so prevalent in our record of public address as to be, in the words of Kenneth Burke, one of those "situations typical and recurrent enough for men to feel the need for having a name for them." In life, an attack upon a person's character, upon his worth as human being, does seem to demand a direct response (pp. 273-274).

Assuming transparency, it would be easy to suggest that *image restoration* is an umbrella term to *apologia*. Whereas stating "image restoration" conjures up a variety of strategies to repair a damaged reputation, apologia suggests one specific strategy: an outright apology. Yet as a rhetorical genre, apologia is not so simplistic.

Benoit (1997) states that image restoration tactics emerge in light of an attack. "An attack has two components: 1. The accused is held responsible for an action. 2. That act is considered offensive" (p.178). This model of generic criticism is applied to corporations. Yet it does not necessarily apply strictly to accusations of criminal or negligent activity. Benoit clearly applies the broad definition of an act *deemed* offensive.

This is important in explaining how this genre is relevant to the discourse of Vince McMahon. Even in situations where his accusers are not outwardly claiming that

he is "breaking the law", McMahon's moral character as an individual and a businessman are constantly questioned. Actions need not be deemed offensive on a personal or professional level but also on a level of values. Ware and Linkguel (1973) claim "the questioning of a man's moral nature, motives, or reputation is qualitatively different from the challenging of his policies" (p. 274).

This qualitative difference is reflected by the two areas in which one can commit an act that is deemed offensive: competency and community. Corporations are expected to maintain capability and aptitude. Hearit (1995) states that the competence factor of an organization "concerns corporate effectiveness— the ability to 'deliver' the goods" (p. 2). Community legitimacy establishes that a company is ethical by the standards of the society in which it operates. Thus, there are two types, or kategoria, of charges that can be leveled against an organization (Ryan, 1982): incompetence and irresponsibility.

Benoit (1997) claims "the key question is not if the act was in fact offensive, but whether the act is *believed* by the relevant audience(s) to be heinous" (p. 178). The importance of the audience in this form of generic criticism demonstrates why McMahon is a unique subject of criticism. Image restoration criticism is generally applied to a company or corporate leader whose relevant audience is composed of its customers. If the customers have a negative view of the company, it is assumed that business will then suffer. The corporate leader's image is usually straightforward in dealing with his or her audience: they understand that s/he is in a position of authority and responsibility.

Vince McMahon is unique because he does not just stand in this position of authority. His role as the chairman of the company is accompanied by his role as an onscreen performer in a product where audiences readily identify with the character over

the actor. Gerald Morton claims (Mortense, 1998), "When you shake hands with (wrestler) Ric Flair, you're shaking the hand of the Ric Flair whose match you're going to watch, whose paraphernalia you're going to buy. The person and the character are one and the same." Thus the suspension of disbelief on a professional wrestling program differs from that of other scripted television events. A WWF program does not even list the actors that are playing the roles. Most wrestling characters are never referred to by their given names even as they appear in non-wrestling media outlets.

Therefore, McMahon must be conscious of playing out which reactions he wants his *character* of the WWF chairman to elicit and which reactions he wants the true WWF chairman to elicit. If he is portraying negative elements in his character because the audience can relate to them, then he must be careful that they do not relate those qualities to his actual personality. This has created different rhetorical situations for McMahon as his role as a performer and as a power figure in the company have been altered over the years since he purchased Capitol Wrestling Corporation from his father in 1982.

In his early days as WWF president, insiders saw him as more powerful than he is today as his wife has assumed more visibility as a business representative. Yet his role as a character, as opposed to an announcer, has given his persona another dimension and has allowed the public to observe McMahon more onscreen as a personality and less as an observer. This as given McMahon the appearance of more power to the general audience than he appeared to have in the mid-1980s.

On the surface, his strategies of image restoration vary depending on the situation. Yet there is an issue that can be examined for consistency: emotive expressiveness. This provides a possibility to notice a pattern in McMahon's behavior. Is McMahon more

likely to express shame in his defense or vice-versa? If this expression in consistent in a variety of situations, then the critic can be able to answer that query.

Each situation can also be studied for the variance of competence and community factors. Is one more important than the other for the rhetor? Community issues tend to call the rhetor's "heart" in question as stated by Ware and Linkguel (1973). Steering the argument into the competency arena lessens this burden though it may increase the pressure of proving one's worth in his or her's particular profession.

I argue that Benoit's (1997) categorization of image restoration strategies can be divided into two separate categories. This reflects the paradigm of expressiveness that I have discussed: shame and the lack of it. Benoit (1997) identifies 14 types of image restoration strategies and groups these behaviors into five categories. It is important to review the categories as some reveal more repentant tones than others.

Whether McMahon falls on one side of the scale in terms of repentance or somewhere in between may offer some indication of what his audience demands in terms of image restoration. The five categories are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action and mortification. These categories can be further divided into two distinct areas.

It is important to look past the viewpoint of the rhetor about the specific situation and evaluate several situations for consistency in tone. This is where a communication pattern may be identified. The two areas that I have grouped Benoit's strategies into each contain different tone of emotion and expression operating with the paradigm of shame. The first three categories rely less on repentance and more on justification. The latter two rely more on remorse, as demonstrated by the following tables:

Table 3.1

ACTION JUSTIFICATION STRATEGIES OF APOLOGIA: THREE CATEGORIES

CATEGORY		
Denial	**CHARACTERISTIC OF STRATEGY/CLAIM**	**EXAMPLE**
Simple Denial	Did not do action, act did not occur or act is not harmful	"I did not sexually harass the employee" or "Act in no way constitutes harassment."
Shift Blame	Another did the act	"Our product was defective because it was tampered with."
Evade Responsibility	**CHARACTERISTIC**	**EXAMPLE**
Provocation	Act was in response to another's offense	"Our company moved because of new state laws."
Defeasiblity	Lack of information or ability led to the act	"I was not informed of the new meeting time."
Accident	Act was a mistake	"Conflict in scheduling was inadvertent."
Good Intentions	Act was meant well	"Unneeded repairs were conducted with the customers' interest in mind."
Reduce Offensiveness	**CHARACTERISTIC**	**EXAMPLE**
Bolster	Company/leader and/or act has positive traits	"We have produced a quality product for 50 years."
Minimize	Act is not serious	"The scheduling mishap only created a minor temporary confusion."
Differentation	Act is less serious than similar ones	"Our prices remain favorable compared to competition."
Transcendence	Negative effect of act is offset by a positive/more important considerations	"Animal testing is justified by the benefits to humans."
Attack accuser	Person(s) making the charge is/are not credible	"The allegations stem from our competition and their own vested interests."
Compensate	Victims are being/have been reimbursed	"The customers have been provided with free service upon their next visit."

Table 3.2

REMORSE STRATEGIES OF APOLOGIA: TWO CATEGORIES

Corrective Action	**CHARACTERISTIC**	**EXAMPLE**
Corrective Action	There is a plan to solve problem and/or plan to ensure problem does not recur	"We will be conducting an internal investigation."
Mortification	**CHARACTERISTIC**	**EXAMPLE**
Mortification	Apology	"On behalf of the company, I am sorry for all inconvenience."

Image Restoration Strategies: Action Justification

There are two ways that a corporate leader or rhetor can practice denial. One is simple denial: stating that the alleged action did not occur. For example, a company president may be accused of sexual harassment. S/he may choose to do nothing publicly except state that no harassment or sexual activity transpired. Another form of simple denial is to not deny the *action* but to deny any *harm*. To return to the harassment example, the company president could perhaps acknowledge that s/he committed the alleged action (such as making a romantic advance) but state that it does not constitute harassment and that the negative effect is completely non-existent.

The second is to acknowledge the action but deny any part in its transpiring. If a product is defective, a company may claim that the distributor tampered with it rather than placing the blame on its own manufacturing process. This strategy is a somewhat riskier form of denial as it still acknowledges that wrongdoing occurred.

Both strategies are designed to completely exonerate the rhetor from the supposedly unsavory action. The rhetor does not seek to argue that perhaps the action was not so bad or that there was a misunderstanding but rather s/he literally attempts to absolve him or herself of it altogether.

There are more strategies that fall under the category of evasion of responsibility. In these instances, the action is acknowledged to have happened and the rhetor acknowledges a role in it. Yet s/he in some way attempts to portray himself or herself as an unwitting or forced participant in such an action.

The first strategy is claiming *provocation*: the action was committed in retaliation to another offensive act. One common example of provocation as cited by Benoit (1997)

occurs when companies move from an area— taking jobs with them. The company will often claim that the act is in reaction to a new law in the area (whether it is the city or state). This is designed to put the onus on government officials for creating an environment that caused that move to happen.

The second is *defeasibility*: the action was committed due to lack of information on the rhetor's part. If a representative misses a meeting, s/he may simply claim that the meeting time was switched and s/he was not made aware of the new time. This strategy is somewhat risky for high-level corporate figures as the public may assume that these individuals have a great deal of control over information and should rarely be caught unaware.

The third is to acknowledge the action but deny intent; to claim that the act was a mishap or *accident*. To return to a scheduling example, a company may create a public firestorm by placing an event at an inappropriate time or in conflict with another important occurrence. Its president may respond by simply stating that the scheduling conflict was a mishap and completely inadvertent.

Lastly, the figure may admit to willfully doing the act but claim that while the result was indeed negative, the intentions were honorable. Benoit (1997) cites the example of the Sears company being charged with auto repair fraud. This stemmed from reports of "unnecessary" repairs. Sears claimed that this was "preventive maintenance" (p. 180). If the company wanted to take this defense further, it could have expressed how importance this maintenance was and how the company had the best interest of its customers in mind when performing these tasks.

The most complex category of image restoration strategies is the reduction of offensiveness of the event. The commonality of all of these approaches is that the figure admits to purposeful committing of the action but attempts to persuade the audience that *the action was not as offensive as it is being made out to be.* There are six forms of this defense.

The first is bolstering: rhetors stress a positive aspect of themselves or their company which they feel somewhat offsets the negative action. A very common example is to emphasize a strong track record. If a company has remained in business for 50 years, its president will likely point this out. The track record of the company would indicate then that it usually "delivers the goods." Otherwise, it would have ceased to exist.

The second is minimizing: the wrongdoing is admitted but the rhetor claims that the impact of the negative result is minor. An airline may create confusion with scheduling conflicts of departing flights. Yet if the problem is corrected in due time, its representatives will likely point out that the negative effects of the conflict were "minor" and "temporary." This defense is practically impossible to utilize in situations involving fatalities.

The third is differentiation: the act is compared to similar but less offensive action so as to make that action seem less offensive itself. One example of differentiation would be one claiming that s/he borrowed an item rather than stealing. The action remains the same but the description is less offensive. Competitors also make for great differentiation defenses. If a company receives complaints about high pricing, but can

point out another company that is charging more, it will likely point this out as a differentiation defense.

The fourth reduction strategy is transcendence: the rhetor claims that there is direct benefit from the action that outweighs the negative results. Some argue that product testing on animals is an act of cruelty. A form of transcendence would be stating the benefits to humans outweigh the consequences to the animals.

The fifth is to attack the accusers in order to reduce their credibility. Hence their accusations are portrayed as holding little weight. This is an especially likely strategy if the accuser is direct competition: "The competition only wishes to discredit us because of their own interest in selling more of their product than us." The past of the accuser may also be brought into question as part of this strategy. If the accused feels s/he can portray the accusers as shady figures with a history of certain vendettas or unreliability, then s/he will discuss this in an attempt to offset the offense.

The final reduction strategy is compensation. The rhetor refers to another action that s/he feels "makes up" for the offense and thereby voids it. This is a simple tactic to execute in small settings. A person who receives poor service at an automobile repair shop might be provided with a free tune-up or some other free service as compensation. In larger scale situations, the defense proves to be difficult. Once again, fatalities make this strategy practically impossible. The statement that "nothing can replace the loss of a loved one" is held to be true by most.

These three categories of strategies reflect a lack of regret on behalf of the rhetors for their actions. They may or may not acknowledge that an injustice or unsavory action has occurred. Whichever they choose to do, they truly portray a belief that they were not

themselves in the "wrong." A claim typical of most of these strategies is "knowing what I knew then, I would still have behaved in the same manner." The offensiveness is either passed off as non-existent or as the unfortunate result of confusion or the actions of a third party.

However, image restoration need not be limited to this style of communication. If the party does express regret, s/he still is likely to engage in a form of strategy to salvage his or her reputation. S/he will choose to simply acknowledge that s/he is wrong and seek sympathy from the audience in one of two categories of behavior.

Image Restoration Strategies: Repentance

One category is *corrective action*: the organization or leader promises that there will be a plan to ensure that the offense is not repeated. This is an important strategy to enact if the audience is less offended by a singular occurrence and more by the possibility of that occurrence repeating itself. Companies may conduct— or at least publicly state they are conducting— internal investigations over complaints of harassment, incompetence or wrongdoing. This is to project to the consumer or offended party that the company is concerned with isolating the source of the offense and ensuring it does not happen again.

Second, the *mortification* category entails apology in its simplest form. The company or leader expresses regret at the action having occurred. This strategy is the most suggestive of the party understanding that s/he or they were "in the wrong." This also usually involves an expression of sympathy with the parties suffering from the wrongdoing.

Both of these categories of apologia entail that the rhetors clearly acknowledge that an offensive act has occurred and that they have played a proactive role in it. The individuals in these scenarios express clear repentance and are most likely to claim that they would in fact change their actions with the same knowledge base in retrospect. One can also argue that these two strategies are more indicative of shame on behalf of the accused. In the justification model, the corporation or leader may or may not feel that something wrong has occurred, but either way they express little shame or sorrow over their own behavior in the situation.

The issue of human reputation and shame seem to be less at play when competency issues arise. There is not only worth in assessing the discourse for the two forms of defense but to see which forum— competency or community— does the rhetor prefer to engage in if there is a preference at all. Thus I ask two specific questions when looking at McMahon's discourse:

1) Does McMahon employ one model of defense (as I have defined) more than another?

2) Does McMahon stress elements of competency more or less than the elements of community?

By answering these two questions, it can be determined if there is a pattern to McMahon's communication and I can articulate it for analysis.

SCANDAL AND COLLAPSES: RHETORICAL SITUATIONS

After this ascent to the top of the wrestling business, McMahon endured a series of public relations challenges. Each situation threatened his company's stability and each provided potential damage to his reputation. Some situations received more publicity in

the mainstream media whereas others were centered on wrestling media and observers. The five situations were the WWF sex and drug scandals, the onset of the "Monday Night Wars", the onset of "WWF Attitude", the death of WWF performer Owen Hart, and the year 2001 which brought the acquisition of WCW and the flopped XFL endeavor.

First Scandal: Allegations of Drug and Sexual Abuse

When Dr. George Zahorian was arrested for illegally distributing steroids to professional wrestlers in 1991, it would open the floodgates to numerous allegations against the World Wrestling Federation. By early 1992, the accusers were many and the media attention towards the WWF was negative. Ringboy Tom Cole accused the WWF of sexual harassment in the workplace. Then former wrestler Barry Orton and former announcer Murray Hodgson leveled sexual harassment claims against WWF employee Pat Patterson.

Both sexual abuse and drug use were considered to be distasteful to the public at large. These offenses also strayed from a specific narrative frame that McMahon had put around his product: WWF entertainment was "clean" and safe for the whole family. He was placed in his first major crisis as WWF leader. While he had granted interviews as WWF president in the past, such occasions were rare. For a large portion of the WWF audience, McMahon was the announcer of *WWF Superstars* and held little other significance to the product.

The situation presented a challenge mostly on the community front. The threat towards the family reputation of the company was especially pointed from the old guard of performers. 60s and 70s WWWF stalwart and former announcer Bruno Sammartino was highly critical of McMahon and claimed that the WWF "didn't care" about sexual

molestation in the company (Basley, 1992). Classic 1970s heel, "Superstar" Billy Graham, addressing allegations of rampant steroid use in the WWF, stated about Hulk Hogan: "I think he's a liar, I think he's a coward, I think he's the scum of the earth for the lies that he has perpetrated on the kids of America." Graham also accused Hogan of cocaine use. Allegations of steroid abuse in the company also came from former WWF workers Billy Jack Haynes and David Schultz (Johnstone & Bert, 1992).

Nonetheless, McMahon himself endured the most venom. Hodgson portrayed McMahon as a typical self-centered and arrogant businessman: "This is a powerful man with a lot of money who cannot stand to have anybody stand up to him and take him on" (Skulski, 1992). McMahon's former limousine driver stated "the way he goes through people and abuses people, and then throws them away: he's a pig" (Johnstone & Bert, 1992). If McMahon could claim innocence on a moral front, former referee Mike Clark insisted that he was simply incompetent. Yet he did not state this to be true and claimed that McMahon had to have known about illicit activity: "If people like me...know about this...Vince McMahon isn't gonna know?" (Skulski, 1992).

An immediate compensation strategy on behalf of Titan Sports was employed when Tom Cole returned to the World Wrestling Federation during the height of the negative publicity with a rumored $70,000 given to him in back pay. He did not file the lawsuit that his lawyers originally claimed would proceed (Skulski, 1992). However, I must clarify that this was not part of *McMahon's* active strategy of corporate apologia, as he made no reference to the Cole situation publicly. Orton and Hodgson, in particular, persisted with their allegations although Orton's did not involve allegations towards the WWF or McMahon, but Patterson specifically.

In handling the media scrutiny, he insisted that *if* such incidents had occurred, that he did not know of them: "We're family entertainment...we would love to have the media compare our (drug policy) to the International Olympic Committee or the NFL" (Whitworth, 1992). McMahon was clearly engaging in bolstering strategies by referring to the implementation of a WWF drug policy and especially in his comparison of the WWF to the NFL and the IOC. McMahon attempted to deflect the criticism of rampant steroid use in wrestling by claiming that whether or not such allegations were true, the WWF was doing much more to solve the problem that other athletic organizations were.

A specific differentiation strategy was utilized. McMahon was careful to clarify the changes in federal law regarding steroids over the years. "(Wrestlers) all testified that they had used steroids...which I have as well by the way...steroids were legal at that time. They are not now" (Whitworth, 1992).

He also employed denial strategies; he switched from simple denial to shifting the blame. On CNN's *Larry King Live*, he was adamant that the allegations were false: "It's a bunch of bunk" (Whitworth, 1992). Then on an airing of the television program *Donahue*, he acknowledged that sexual harassment may have occurred but that he simply did not know about it. He insisted that it was absurd that he would allow such a thing to transpire: "Why would I condone this kind of activity and risk...revenue?" (Basley, 1992). Despite the differing tones, it is clear that McMahon utilized a denial strategy in both instances.

He also went on the offense against his accusers; he insisted that there was very little credibility to many of the former employees' claims. He wondered why the allegations were being brought to the public but had not been brought to the police:

"Why not notify the proper authorities?" (Basley, 1992). He stated that the accusers were bitter because they were no longer employed by the WWF. On *Larry King Live*, McMahon stated to Sammartino "you never forgave me for firing your son" (Whitworth, 1992).

He engaged in a memorable on-air debate with Hodgson on *Donahue* (Basley, 1992). During this encounter, he questioned why Hodgson waited so long to bring the sexual advances of Patterson to the attention of the WWF's human resources department. He also accused Hodgson of requesting an exorbitant amount of money in exchange for his silence on the matter. Hodgson countered that it was the WWF who was trying to buy him off and not he who was trying to extort money.

McMahon remained insistent that the credibility of his accusers was shaky at best. When Orton informed him on *Larry King* that he was writing a book, McMahon replied brusquely "Enough said"— insinuating that Barry was merely fabricating his allegations for publicity.

The strategy of attacking accusers was not just done on an individual basis. He also insinuated a full-fledged vendetta against he and the WWF:

> McMahon: It just seems as though they're ganging up on us, all at one time.
> Interviewer: These are people with axes to grind?
> McMahon: Yes.
> Interviewer: They would like to see you fail?
> McMahon (smiling): No question. (Fitzpatrick, 1992).

He also fired back at New York Post writer Phil Mushnick (who remains one of McMahon's most visible media critics as of this writing). He claimed that the public was being provided questionable reporting and that he was being villainized:

> I think that there are certain members of the media who are something less than legitimate, shall we say...during telephone conversations, with never having talked with me initially. Never calling the offices to substantiate any of his allegations... Mushnick says 'Vince McMahon is the kind of being who should rot in hell. I never met the guy, I never talked to the guy and I'd appreciate if he'd let the big man upstairs make that decision, not him (Whitworth, 1992).

Quite clearly, McMahon was held responsible for a variety of unsavory activity in his organization. The allegations became as direct as possible during an edition of the program *Now It Can Be Told* when Rita Chatterton accused McMahon of sexual molestation (Skulski, 1992). McMahon never did address these allegations in a public forum though he did deny the action through legal action by filing a suit against both the program and Chatterton. The suits were never brought to court (Keith, 2001).

At no point during any of his media appearances did McMahon appear shaken about the supposed wrongdoings that had occurred. He steadfastly maintained his innocence. He was visibly more aggressive when placed in a debate situation, as the *Larry King* and *Donahue* situations demonstrated. When placed in an individual situation, he chose to either be cool in assessment of the situation (Fitzpatrick, 1992) or to avoid questioning altogether (Johnstone & Bert, 1992, Skulski, 1992).

There was, however, an attempt on both his and the WWF's part to portray that corrective action was in fact being taken. WWF employees Pat Patterson and Terry Garvin handed in resignations while ring announcer Mel Phillips was suspended. Phillips had endured punishment but the WWF did not commit to punishment towards either Patterson or Garvin. McMahon insisted that their resignations were voluntary and that each employee was demonstrating company loyalty by allowing the WWF to conduct an independent investigation of allegations (Basley, 1992).

Both Garvin and Patterson would eventually return to the WWF. No one pressed charges against either individual. The attempt to portray corrective action was not entirely effective as some questioned if the resignations were "for show." Sammartino stated, "I would say that Pat Patterson, probably Garvin too...some way, shape or form, they're still with the organization, still on the payroll." Hodgson echoed this thought (Skulski, 1992).

In synopsis, McMahon employed a wide variety of strategies against distinct allegations of two types of unsavory moral action (drug use and sexual abuse). Yet he stressed the competency of his organization as his defense of the company's "comprehensive" drug policy demonstrates. Despite the varying strategies, the one that was accentuated and consistent throughout each media outlet was his contention that his critics were not credible.

Billionaire Ted vs. The "World Whining Federation"

The premiere of *WCW Monday Nitro* and the onset of the "Monday Night Wars" in the fall of 1995 changed professional wrestling forever. Never before had two promotions with the money and magnitude of the WWF and WCW been pitted head-to-head on a weekly national cable basis. The boldness of the WCW maneuver paid off when *Nitro* immediately defeated *RAW* in the first head-to-head battle between the two.

WCW president and announcer Eric Bischoff was relentless in his attacks on the WWF. He would often announce the results of the pre-taped *RAW* programs at the beginning of the live *Nitro* broadcast. If *RAW* were live that night, he would provide fans with "updates" so that they could watch *Nitro* while knowing what had occurred on *RAW*.

Former WWF performer Madusa threw her WWF Women's Title in a garbage can on a *Nitro* broadcast (Keith, 2001).

When the WWF finally retaliated on *RAW* programming, the venom was pointed not at Bischoff, but at Ted Turner and former WWF employees. The parody "Billionaire Ted's Wrasslin' Warroom" portrayed Ted Turner as a money-grubbing and oftentimes delusional businessman. The parody was accompanied by legal action: Titan Sports filed an Federal Trades Commission complaint. It alleged "that Turner Broadcasting System has been "engaged in a systematic plan...to destroy the WWF in order that TBS might achieve a monopoly over the professional wrestling business" (Brown, 1996).

The memories of some fans were short, but others remembered the WWF's rise to the top in the mid-1980s. One internet fan summarized the criticisms of many "old-school" fans:

> He ignored the competition until they started beating him in TV ratings and hiring away his "slaves". Then he started whining as if the whole idea of competition was "wrong" and that people with lots of money shouldn't try to compete with him...(he) put numerous promotions out of business in the 80's by every means at his disposal...now when Vince has competition and problems, he whines about it (Visser, 1996).

Bischoff also capitalized on this perception on an edition of *Nitro* in which he gave away results to the "World Whining Federation" programming (February 26, 1996). McMahon was left to defend the parodies and his hostile attitude towards Turner and WCW. He used three strategies: provocation, differentiation and attacking accusers.

McMahon repeatedly claimed that his attacks on WCW were not in keeping with the WWF's philosophy but that they were provoked to do so by cutthroat opposition. He began to discuss the details of his falling out with Turner in 1985 that had allowed the

WWF to part ways with TBS. He argued that WCW was not endeavoring to make money but to simply hurt the WWF at any cost:

> If Ted Turner wanted to help his wrestling company...he would have used some other night other than Monday night...he'll give you some malarkey on how the wrestling audience on Monday night has grown as a result of his effort...Turner knew whatever the rating would be, he would be sharing it with the World Wrestling Federation (Russo, p. 11).

He underscored the sense of provocation by pointing out how long the WWF had waited before staging the "Billionaire Ted" sketches: "Nitro came on in September. We did nothing to retaliate until finally we had had enough...it was time to fight" (Russo, p. 11).

Allegations that WCW's actions were no different than the WWF's business practices of the mid-1980s almost directly forced differentiation strategies. After all, McMahon could not *deny* his actions that led to the demise of many regional promoters. He claimed that his actions in the 1980s were different— and justified—because his organization operated as a single entity that borrowed a great deal of money in order to achieve success. Turner, he argued, was staying in the wrestling business only because he had the financial wherewithal to sustain astounding yearly losses that the WWF never could. This was an unfair environment and different from the WWF approach:

> Ted Turner is not competing as one wrestling company to another. Had it not been for subsidies from his own organization, his wrestling organization would have ceased to exist as we know it now. Estimates of at least 60 million dollars in losses thus far are batted about frequently in the trade journals (p. 13).

One can make the argument that McMahon did not attack his accusers. If one considers his accusers to be a certain portion of the general public, that would be fairly accurate. It is still nonetheless important to note that McMahon did attack Turner on

numerous occasions— both by his production of the "Billionaire Ted" sketches and by questioning the creativity of WCW.

In the first "Billionaire Ted" sketch (RAW, January 1, 1996), "Ted" questions why the WWF's "wrasslin' is better than ours." The characters of his employees note that the WWF has "better athletes" and that (presumably) WCW only has "greedy, disloyal" ex-WWF workers. The caricatures of Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage— the "Huckster" and "Nacho Man"— watch as employees try to encourage them to do maneuvers like the WWF superstars they watch on video. They refuse because they are too old: "At my age, my feet don't leave the ground."

This was part of McMahon's attack. While it was not directly relevant to the matter of unfair business practice, he attempted to create the image of the WWF as a vitally creative organization. Turner's WCW, on the other hand, was bent on making money regardless of its creative power. He echoed this in comments: "Turner's organization has no idea how to make a star. All they can do is buy" (Russo, p. 12). The "power through purchase" image of Turner was furthered in one of the final "Billionaire Ted" sketches in which the mock Turner proclaimed "Money! Power! Power! Money! Take your pick, I want more!" (RAW, February 5, 1996).

McMahon's defense again leans chiefly on detracting from the credibility of another. He also establishes a strong competency argument to complement the community issue (unfair business). By questioning WCW's "star-making" ability, he attempts to strengthen the WWF's reputation as an efficient, creative and original promotion. Moral issues aside, giving the customer what s/he wants is portrayed as a

large priority: "This is still America, the public votes, and I think in the end, they'll vote for the World Wrestling Federation" (Russo, p. 15).

Montreal Screwjob: The Ascent of "Attitude"

The "Montreal Screwjob" of November 1997 occurred at what might be considered a desperate time in McMahon's promotional career. World Championship Wrestling was clearly winning the "Monday Night War." It was also only months away from what would end up being its most successful pay-per-view (*Starrcade '97*). It was during this time that McMahon chose to release signature WWF star Bret Hart from his contract.

McMahon told Hart that cost cutting largely motivated the move. Hart's contract called for $17 million over 20 years as a WWF employee— three as a wrestler and seventeen as a creative contributor (Meltzer, 1997). After signing this contract in the fall of 1996, Hart's future seemed clear as he stated "I'll be with the WWF forever" (Blake, Ostriker & Jay, 1998). Along with the contract release, McMahon also told Hart that Shawn Michaels had to defeat Hart for the WWF title at *Survivor Series* largely due to rumors that WCW president Eric Bischoff would announce Hart's WCW signing the following night on *Nitro*. He claimed that the vision of the opposition publicly announcing the signing of the WWF champion would "kill his business" (Meltzer, 1997).

McMahon's authority in such a matter would usually be unquestionable. Yet Hart's contract decreed "reasonable creative control" over his final 30 days within the company should the WWF decide to terminate the deal. Once the "double-cross" had occurred, speculation began immediately and it became evident to many fans that not everyone had been "in on the plan" regarding the Hart-Michaels match. Hart punched

McMahon in an unfilmed locker room altercation, leaving McMahon with a bruise under his left eye.

The situation occurred as the WWF "rebranded" its product. Influenced by Philadelphia-based ECW, the company began the campaign of "WWF Attitude." The WWF product had been gradually becoming more sexually suggestive and violent since 1996 but "Attitude" was a public proclamation of this new approach. Both before and after the events in Montreal, Bret had expressed dismay about this direction. McMahon himself accentuated the change— and refuted Bret's concerns— with a public statement. The statement again reflects McMahon's emphasis on competence over community as a rhetorical strategy. His words reflect a greater concern with pleasing viewers than maintaining a strong moral company line:

> We in the WWF think that you, the audience, are quite frankly tired of having your intelligence insulted. We also think that you're tired of the same old simplistic theory of 'good guys' vs. 'bad guys.' Surely the era of the superhero who urged you to say your prayers and take your vitamins is definitely passé (Blake, Ostriker & Jay, 1998).

McMahon's defense of his *Survivor Series* actions was immediate. A great deal of his energy was spent on attacking his direct accuser: Bret Hart. Hart had left the WWF due to the company choosing to release him but McMahon stressed issues of finances and loyalty on Bret's part. Hart suspected that McMahon himself had leaked his departure to the wrestling media in order to portray him as a "sellout" (Blake, Ostriker & Jay, 1998). This could never be proven but McMahon did stress the financial issue in interviews: "He's making $3 million a year, he's working fewer dates...who is really going to feel sorry for Bret?" (Cole, February 21, 1998).

McMahon also offered that it was not he who had committed a dishonorable act but rather that Hart had not agreed to do the right thing and drop the title to Michaels. He argued that Hart had violated the "time honored tradition" by not agreeing to "job" the title to Michaels at the appropriate time before his departure. He also implicated that this was indicative and consistent of Bret's overall behavior, stating that Bret often was a "crybaby" backstage (Off the record, February 24, 1998). He communicated the spirit of the WWF as a team, fans included, and that his actions benefited the "family" as a whole:

> I'm charged with making the best decision for all of our fans, the best decision for all of our superstars, the best decision for all of our employees, and I did it...I had not known Bret to be selfish. I never could have anticipated that Bret would not be the businessman he always was (AOL, November 17, 1997).

McMahon's statements against Hart reveal more than an attack on his accuser. At the same moment that he took "full responsibility" for his actions, he shifted the blame for his actions on Hart for refusing to "job." Only eight days after the event, a solemn "out of character" interview aired on *RAW*. During this interview, McMahon put the onus of responsibility on Hart: "Bret screwed Bret. And he can look in the mirror and know that." He also argued that he had played a role in *compensating* Hart by bidding up for his services so that he could reap the benefits of a lucrative WCW contract (November 17, 1997).

He also employed transcendence and good intention strategies by repeatedly referring to the WWF as a whole as often as possible. He argued his intentions were for the betterment of the WWF as a whole; this meant that all employees would benefit. The WWF was portrayed as more important than any individual concern. In claiming the support of his employees, he stressed the necessity of his actions for the company: "The

vast majority of WWF Superstars fully support my decision but like me, many of them are sorry that that decision had to be made" (AOL, November 17, 1997).

McMahon has never demonstrated the strategy of attacking and focusing on an accuser more so than he has in justifying the "Montreal screwjob." The issue remains a hot topic of discussion today and McMahon contains it as a strictly McMahon-Hart issue; in which he was correct and Hart was selfish. The moral implications of violating contracts or the direction of the product play a secondary role to the competency issue of maintaining an entertaining product.

Rumors circulated in 2002 that Hart might re-appear in the WWF for the *Wrestlemania* event in Toronto. Hart confirmed those rumors in a *Calgary Sun* column and detailed his refusal. McMahon responded not only by highlighting his wish to please the fans but also by pointing out Hart's insensitivity to the confidentiality of the matter:

> One of the public things that my character (Mr. McMahon) says is that I always do everything I do for WWF fans...the reality of it is, that is the case. Despite the way I would feel personally about someone, if it's the right business thing to do, I'll do it for our audience. So, I went through the right diplomatic channels to invite Bret and, quite frankly, I thought it was on a confidential basis and agreed that it would be. Unfortunately, I, like a few other people, read his diatribe in the *Calgary Sun* (Lefko, 2002).

In a follow-up interview, Hart also provided a description of McMahon's attitude that corresponds with the action justification model: "There was an open door for me to consider Vince in a greater light. I think an apology is in order. That is not something that I would take lightly. I would accept an apology" (Marvez, 2002).

Bret Hart would also play an integral role in McMahon's next public and corporate crisis.

Tragedy in Kansas City

The death of Owen Hart at a WWF event in Kansas City in May of 1999 brought the most media coverage that the WWF had received since the steroid and sexual abuse scandal of the early 90s. The situation was especially challenging because the public attention was not entirely focused on the death itself. Some of the attention immediately focused on the failure in rigging that led to the accident; especially once Owen's widow Martha filed a wrongful death suit against the WWF in June (Wittenauerl, 1999). Other actions by McMahon and the WWF drew attention.

The company had controversially continued the pay-per-view after the accident. Also, the media attention also raised awareness of the increasingly violent and sexual nature of the entire WWF product. While Owen's death itself seemed to be merely a tragic accident due to bad timing, there were those who questioned why he was placed in a "stunt man" position in the first place. Owen's sister Ellie stated that Owen was "a sacrifice for the ratings" in the war between the WWF and WCW. Bob Lichter, president of the Center for Media and Public affairs stated that wrestling had "gone from something laughable to something dangerous" (Johnston, May 25, 1999).

The WWF was preparing to go public at this point and the reputation of the company was very important in ensuring a strong launch. Television ratings and pay-per-view revenues were soaring but the incident threatened the company's reputation as a quality entertainment entity. It also put McMahon's morality in question yet again. He used several strategies in interviews and discourse.

A small amount of corrective action was offered. McMahon promised that the WWF would never again attempt any harness stunts. This was in reaction to the

allegation that Owen was in no way qualified to be in the position he was placed in. Professional stuntman Steve Lucescu stated, "He was a wrestler, not a stuntman and shouldn't have been doing it to start with" (Ralph, 1999). The WWF would eventually settle with Martha Hart out-of-court in the wrongful death suit but not after a heated dialog between the two.

McMahon's bolstering strategies were twofold. The WWF put forth a tribute edition of *RAW* the night following Owen's death. The show featured numerous wrestlers offering testimony to the life of Owen Hart. The show portrayed the WWF as a tight-knit family that had valued Owen as a persona and show how many workers were deeply saddened by his passing.

He also used a bolstering strategy that also worked as compensation. This was based largely on his quoting of financial figures surrounding Owen's funeral. Martha expressed dismay that the WWF chose to air footage of Owen's funeral on RAW. She claimed that she had specifically instructed McMahon not to do this. In a letter to the *Calgary Sun*— which he claimed was not for publication— McMahon claimed that he had been informed by WWF Canada president Carl DeMarco to proceed with such actions. Yet he also repeatedly made reference to the WWF's generosity in providing for the funeral. He listed a number of items that the WWF paid for and stated:

> I don't know why Mrs. Hart would publicly raise the issue of who paid for Owen's funeral. It was the WWF's expressed intention...to pay for all funeral expenses...the WWF also paid $152,200 U.S. for transportation expenses for WWF talent and personnel (June 2, 1999).

He also stressed continuously that the death was an accident and that there was no ill intent in having him perform the stunt. In the controversy immediately surrounding

the event, McMahon also engaged in attacking in accuser while stressing that the event was accidental in a verbal confrontation with one reporter:

> McMahon: First of all, I resent your tone, umm...
> Reporter: I resent the sarcasm...
> McMahon (as reporter speaks as well): No, I resent your tone lady, OK...
> Reporter:....again I ask, why was there not precautionary measures?
> McMahon:...this was a tragic accident. It's a tragic accident. Don't try to put yourself in the spotlight here, OK. This was an *accident*, do you understand what I'm saying? An *accident*. And everything that should have taken place in terms of rigging— to our, to our knowledge at this moment— did take place. It was rehearsed in the afternoon and everything was fine. And that's all I know (Jay, 1999).

With Martha clearly distraught over the loss, McMahon did not seek to slur her in any way. He did imply that Martha could use this sympathy to her advantage: "I do not win (a debate) in terms of sympathy regardless of the facts. She could be lying through her teeth. I'm not going to win regardless of the facts" (Off the record, July 27, 1999).

Thus, a majority of McMahon's strategy of attacking an accuser was employed with Bret Hart as the target. Vince suggested that Bret "had Martha's ear" and that he was to blame for her discontent over the WWF's handling over the situation. He carefully portrayed Bret as an individual who allowed his personal vendetta to cloud fellow family member's feelings on the incident. McMahon referred to a conversation that he and Bret had shortly after Owen's death and stated that Bret only wanted to talk about the *Survivor Series* incident and not Owen. He remarked, "I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was almost as if he wasn't human" (Off the record, July 27, 1999).

The competency argument continued to hold precedent over the community for McMahon. By refusing to perform harness stunts again, he perhaps hoped that such

issues would be resolved for the public. Yet the morality questions still loomed over his head. As this exchange demonstrates, McMahon's concerns with producing a profitable product put his personal integrity in question:

> McMahon: Any successful entrepreneur changes with the times and absolutely has his finger on the marketplace, and is responsible for one thing: giving the public what they want...with giving the public what they want comes a lot of responsibility.
> Michael Landsberg: It's not just about giving them what they want. Pornographers hide behind that (Off the record, July 27, 1999).

Still, McMahon steadfastly maintained that his company was responsible in producing content. Shortly after going public as World Wrestling Federation Entertainment, the WWF created the WWF Parents website. This demonstrated a concern of the company for community standards yet McMahon himself rarely discussed (or discusses) the site. It does not seem to be an important element of his rhetoric.

New Challenges: The XFL Failure and WCW Purchase

It bears repeating that apologia theory does not always apply to a strictly offensive action with a direct accuser. It refers to any and all threats to any corporate figure's reputation. As Benoit and Brinson state (1994), "when our reputation is threatened, we have a motivation to offer explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies or excuses for our behavior" (p. 76). In 2001, McMahon's reputation was threatened not by a specific "wrong" that he was accused of but rather by two business ventures that represented elements of his personality that many found undesirable. McMahon was left to defend his reputation against accusations of tastelessness, brashness and arrogance.

World Wrestling Federation Entertainment's attempt to launch a professional football league with the XFL was a colossal failure. From the league's onset, it was a target of talk shows and media. The reputation of McMahon as a professional wrestling huckster worked against him in the sporting arena. Stressing that WWFE could bring its elements of production to the XFL, he nonetheless maintained that assuming one product would follow in the other's footsteps as a scripted event was absurd. Yet the selling point of the league to the media was the very same thing that the WWF was being credited with: drawing a young male audience (Monk, 2000).

McMahon could be held partially responsible for the way for the media viewing the product as lowbrow entertainment. He described the NFL as a league for "pantywaists" and stressed the violent aspects of the XFL as reported by Boehlert (2001): "'The protection of the quarterback is something that the NFL invented simply to protect their investment; it has nothing to do with safety,' complained McMahon, who wants to return to the day when 'the whole idea was to kill the quarterback.'" This immediately drew fire towards McMahon and XFL organizers as exploitative of employees' lack of well being; an accusation that was particularly stinging as WWFE settled with Martha Hart for $18 million as the league was launching. Sports-marketing consultant Dean Bonham stated about the "kill the quarterback" hype:

> That strikes me as tasteless. Quarterbacks are human beings with families and careers and aspirations for themselves. If the only way the XFL thinks it can make it is to damage a person and ruin their career with concussions, then the league will last an even shorter period of time. We've got enough serious violence in football. And if they continue to hype that theme, somebody's going to be paralyzed or killed. (Boehlert, 2001).

The league's astonishingly quick folding may have reduced McMahon's brashness, but as the XFL accelerated towards its demise, a positive business development emerged. WWFE announced the purchase of its archrival WCW on March 23, 2001. He was not present for the conference call announcing the acquisition. However, some critics felt that McMahon performed his boasting through his onscreen wrestling persona during the RAW-Nitro simulcast of March 26, 2001. *Pro Wrestling Torch* columnist Wade Keller suggested that McMahon's obsession with Ted Turner—not storyline purposes— was the real motivation behind his character's gloating:

> McMahon has been obsessed with Turner for years. He still is. And last night on *Raw*, he lived out his fantasy. Vince got off on the fantasy of Ted presenting him with a contract to sign at *WrestleMania*...it took 15 years, but Vince put Ted out of business. That's how Vince sees it. And even more so, Vince got to humiliate Ted Turner by gloating about the victory on Ted's own station! (March 27, 2001).

McMahon's strategies in this situation were not as numerous as in the past. While Linda McMahon had officially run the company since the mid-1990s, Vince had still always been seen as the "boss" of the organization. The company's public status placed Linda in the limelight through conference calls. McMahon was left to defend his creative decisions and persona with some of the burden of business accountability lifted off of his shoulders. He employed three strategies in light of the negative media attention placed upon him: good intentions, attacking the accuser and mortification.

In establishing good intentions, McMahon again returned to his credibility to the customer as his selling point. He stressed that the XFL provided a more enjoyable atmosphere for its players than the highly publicized NFL: "You can't show your exuberance (in the NFL). Certain gestures are taboo, your shirt tail has to be tucked in,

your chin strap has to be fastened, and they tell you what kind of shoes to wear" (Stone, 2000).

Upon the league's folding, he reminded the media that the XFL had been sensitive to criticism and had tried to adjust according. "We tried to figure out every conceivable way to make this work," he argued, "we came up with different combinations and permutations to try to make it work" (Mariotti, 2001, p. 7). He emphasized pride in his fellow workers: "If it didn't work, it didn't work, but again I'm proud of the effort that was made, the attitude that was there and it could have worked just as easily as not" (Lefko, 2002). He also put a positive spin on certain league innovations (such as new camera angles) and stated that the football fan would ultimately benefit: "I would suggest that you will see those (innovations) in the NFL. Our whole imprimatur was to bring the game closer to the fan" (Shapiro, 2001).

McMahon also claimed positive intentions in purchasing WCW. With no major competition on the horizon, it seemed as though WWFE had achieved a virtual monopoly over the wrestling business. Yet McMahon portrayed the situation differently. He argued that WCW was saved by the company— albeit temporarily— and that the WWF was left with no choice but to solve the competition issue itself. He downplayed the significance of the acquisition: "I don't know if anyone benefits that greatly, actually. It was our hope that we would always have competition." He also tried to convey sympathy to those who feared a wrestling monopoly by stating, "what we're attempting to do, obviously, is build our own competition. I don't think Vince McMahon can ever have too much power, that's impossible" (Molinaro, September 4, 2001).

McMahon's tone had become more somber as the WCW-WWF dream storyline was a major disappointment. The good intentions strategy remained his pillar in that area yet the more aggressive strategy of attacking an accuser was utilized in defending against XFL backlash. This was visible in the league's launching in 2000. McMahon expressed resentment towards stock market cynicism at the XFL announcement. He also bristled at the question of whether or not the games would be scripted as WWF matches. He handled both matters very brusquely:

> Asked at the press conference to comment on investor skepticism about the XFL, McMahon said, "Wall Street can kiss my ass." When another reporter asked him if he's trying to become legitimate by creating a football league where the outcome is not scripted in advance (like the WWG wrestling matches), McMahon said, "May I never, ever be thought of as fucking legit" (Dempsey, 2000, p. 31).

The aggressive attitude continued as the league proceeded to the jeers of television critics. The most notable example of this was a heated televised interview with Bob Costas over both XFL and WWF matters in March. Costas criticized the companies for providing a vulgar product. McMahon responded by disparaging Costas for interrupting too often and described him as "elitist" (Gay, 2001).

The XFL debacle did provide a rare example of mortification on McMahon's behalf. It was fleeting in its occurrence. He expressed no regrets over the venture, but during the press conference announcing the league's demise, he admitted responsibility: "The buck stops with me principally. NBC had a lot of faith in me and my organization to field the XFL in a timely fashion, and I think we let NBC down...this was my vision, and it did not work for whatever reason." He was even somewhat apologetic towards the media: "I don't put no blame on the media. The failure was mine" (Rogers, F2, 2001).

Yet again, McMahon chose not to spend a great deal of his image restoration on the community issues. The morals of his business and products were defended in an almost automated fashion. The competency issue remained the strongest for him and given the XFL's financial losses and the disappointment of the WWF-WCW storyline, he was on shaky ground in such defenses. It seems logical that the good intention defense is seen playing a pivotal role in McMahon's rhetoric at this point in his career. The financial results and fan satisfaction did not warrant McMahon claiming that he was giving his people what they wanted. Still, he insisted that this was his main purpose. He continued to portray himself as championing the cause of his viewers.

HOW HAS VINCE MCMAHON HANDLED SITUATIONS WHERE HIS AND/ OR HIS COMPANY'S IMAGE HAVE BEEN CALLED INTO QUESTION?

Over the course of a decade, Vincent K. McMahon, Jr. has faced five specific situations that have put his reputation at stake. I have analyzed each situation and placed the results together in the hopes of identifying a pattern. I now return to the two questions of the discourse analysis.

Does McMahon Employ One Model of Defense More Than Another?

I have established two categories of Benoit's five types of image restoration strategies. Table 3.3 illustrates a compilation of the strategies employed during the five different rhetorical situations.

The table first identifies each specific use of the 14 strategies as described by Benoit (1997). These strategies are then grouped into the five typologies. The "totals" row in the strategies column provides an overall sum of strategies. The "totals" row in the categories table provides an overall sum of the categories encompassed and divides them into totals fitting the action justification model and totals fitting the remorse model.

It demonstrates that McMahon clearly prefers the strategies that I have put under the "action justification" bracket:

Table 3.3

VINCE MCMAHON'S RHETORICAL SITUATIONS AND USES OF APOLOGIA

Situation	Strategies Used	Categories Encompassed
Steroid/Sex Scandals (1992)	Simple Denial Shifting of Blame Bolstering Differentation Attacking accuser Corrective action	Denial (both uses) Reduce Offensiveness (3 uses) Corrective Action
Onset of the Monday Night Wars (1995-6)	Provocation Differentiation Attacking accuser	Evasion of Responsibility (1 use) Reduce Offensiveness (2 uses)
Montreal Screwjob and ascent of "Attitude" (1997-8)	Shifting of Blame Good Intentions Transcension Compensation Attacking accuser	Denial (1 use) Evasion of Responsibility (1 use) Reduce Offensiveness (3 uses)
Owen Hart Tragedy (1999)	Accident Bolstering Compensation Attacking accuser Corrective action	Evasion of Responsibility (1 use) Reduce Offensiveness (3 uses) Corrective Action
XFL debacle/WCW acquisition (2001)	Good Intentions Attacking accuser Mortification	Evasion of Responsibility (1 use) Reduce Offensiveness (1 use) Mortification
TOTALS	Attacking accuser (5) Differentiation (2) Compensation (2) Good intentions (2) Bolstering (2) Shifting of Blame (2) Corrective Action (2) Accident (1) Transcension (1) Provocation (1) Simple Denial (1) Mortification (1)	**JUSTIFICATION** Reduce Offensiveness (**5**) Evasion of Responsibility (**4**) Denial (**2**) **REMORSE** Corrective Action (**2**) Mortification (**1**)

Not only does McMahon rarely employ the remorse strategies, but when does use them, it is usually in a fleeting instance. The XFL mortification example occurred only during one press conference and has since been tempered with comments of less regret. Both corrective action examples were tempered with the lack of acknowledgment of wrongdoing. In the steroid example, the investigative actions were portrayed as being conducted largely due to suspicion but not a firm belief that any WWF employees were in the wrong. It was debated by accusers that suggested that they were merely a "smokescreen to satisfy the public that something has been done" (Skulski, 1992).

The Owen Hart example might be viewed as a longer standing example of firm corrective action; especially considering that the WWF settled with Martha Hart outside of court for a high financial sum. Yet there is no evidence in McMahon's public rhetoric that he expressed a strong regret for Owen having had to perform the stunt. It was only stressed— briefly— that such an event would not occur again. The WWF also did not tone down on other high risk maneuvers such as falls from cages.

Delving within the many action justification strategies, the one Benoit strategy that repeats itself in every instance is attacking the accuser. McMahon repeatedly questions the integrity of those who indict him. Professional wrestling stages a world of conflict. Interestingly, McMahon duplicates this strategy in areas of challenges to his corporate reputation. He plays himself as the hero against a variety of different "villains." If he succeeds, the accusations hold little to no worth— regardless of whether or not McMahon has actually established that the actions did not happen.

The strategies that McMahon prefers are quite clearly the reduction of the offensiveness of an action and evasion of responsibility. The reduction of offensiveness

strategy is used in more than one fashion in all five instances. This indicates that McMahon rarely denies actions but usually chooses to acknowledge them and explain their positive elements in some manner. He clearly favors the action justification model and especially areas of conflict therein, as the repeated attacking of accusers demonstrates.

Does McMahon Stress Elements of Competency More or Less Than Community?

The XFL/WCW situation called his competency into question more so than his community worth. However, the remaining four situations seem largely centered on the moral integrity of Vince McMahon. It is therefore interesting to observe that in each instance, McMahon has responded with primarily competency defenses.

To return to the Ware and Linkguel (1973) definition of the vindicative address, the rhetor attempts to establish recognition of his or her greater worth. This goes beyond dealing with the specifics of an accusation and reminding the public of the rhetor and/or his or her company's greater value beyond the alleged actions. Observing these five rhetorical situations, one observes a greater reliance on competence defenses to establish vindication as each situation progresses. In the 1992 steroid and sex scandal situation, McMahon stressed the reputation of his company as a family-friendly organization.

Yet as the situations of the late-90s arose, his defenses depended greatly on establishing the WWF as the company that gave its public what it wanted. It was less important to discuss the morality of "screwing over" Bret Hart than it was to discuss how the WWF was changing to meet the pulse of its marketplace. In the death of Owen Hart, McMahon stressed that his company did everything that it could in providing safety for Owen and that the accident would not tame the product so long as the public was giving

indication that they were happy with the product. It was less important for McMahon to address the public's distaste for the XFL product and WCW purchase as it was to stress the effort the company put forth to make both work and how the company was not going to continue forth with any ventures that displeased the people.

This is not to suggest that McMahon ignores the community element of rhetoric. It is more accurate to suggest that McMahon conducts his community defense *through* his competency defense. Competency equals the company's ability to "deliver the goods" (Hearit, 1995). In McMahon's rhetoric, "delivering the goods" equals giving the people what they want to see. If they want to see it, it is not inappropriate.

The McMahon-Landsberg pornography analogy summarizes McMahon's stressing of competence defense over community. Rather than responding to Landsberg's comparison by addressing its moral implications, McMahon stays within the parameters of competency. He addresses the public's demands over moral concerns: "I don't know what percentage of the population wants pornography; I would like to think very few" (Off the record, July 27, 1999).

Summary

It is clear that McMahon stresses competency in an action justification model of defense. The two are tightly related. Any action that is good for business is justifiable and McMahon does not publicly question the morals of his audience. He instead focuses on his company's *efficiency* in delivering those wants. The issues of shame and human reputation are secondary to the needs of the product.

McMahon's strategies of justification have also been affected by the shift in his audience. The Garbett (1988) model for building a corporate image may be flawed in

describing the initial projection. Yet the two flawed elements—time and memory decay— are important in describing McMahon's *maintenance* of image.

SHIFTING AUDIENCE

McMahon's audience is not a static entity. Many new— and often younger— North Americans have come to be to WWF fans. The company has a rich history yet this is somewhat threatening to McMahon's image as the scandals of the past are best minimized to project the best image.

McMahon does not ignore *time* for the sake of *memory decay*. The company uses its past to promote itself frequently. The WWF's introductory logo segment that brought in programming in the late 90s announced to its audience: "For over 30 years, the revolutionary force in sports entertainment." McMahon also often cites his father as an influence: "What I wanted to do simply was to take my father's formula that he had used successfully in the Northeast...I really felt my father had the pulse of this business" (Mortense, 1998).

For the positive projection of the past, McMahon does encounter negative elements of his past. Yet it is simpler for him to deal with this challenge with his product. While a great number of WWF viewers are long time wrestling fans, the business features a turnover of audience. Consider the example of the internet fans accusing McMahon of hypocrisy when he complained about Turner's business practices: many fans reacting to that thread on the forum of rec.sport.pro-wrestling had not considered how McMahon had risen in his profession.

This helps McMahon as he is able to use *his* narrative to describe the past. His "version" has a greater impact on a newfound audience. These viewers are not as familiar

with the past as those that have watched wrestling for a long period of time are. Wrestling also went largely unnoticed under the radar of mainstream media until the steroid and sex scandals emerged.

Thus McMahon's take on the 1980s may be as likely to be believed by not only a new audience but by a new generation of media. This provides frustration to some of his critics as exemplified by a 1999 editorial by online reporter John Molinaro:

> He's been ruthless, cutthroat and single-minded in his attempt to rule the wrestling world...who else but the almighty and exalted McMahon would be able to create and mold his own version of the truth? Who else but McMahon would be able to sell a revisionist version of pro wrestling history to an unsuspecting and unquestioning pack of wrestling fans? And who else but McMahon would be able to get away with holding his competition up to one standard and his own company to another? (June 23, 1999).

This may offer a strong reason as to why McMahon choose to use justification strategies over remorseful ones. McMahon not only defends his past but he constructs it to suit his needs. This is evident by his increase in rhetoric against Ted Turner in 1996—a time period when WCW was finally beginning to succeed against the WWF. This is differentiated from the pre-1990s era, in which McMahon was more aloof in acknowledging Turner as competition.

This not only leads to creation of new narratives but modifications of older ones. When the WWF faced the initial backlash of the steroid and sex scandals, McMahon stressed that his programming was solid "family entertainment." His product evolved into more mature subject matter. Rather than claiming that he had abandoned the "family" formula, such past commentaries were never mentioned in McMahon's defense as he instead insisted that the WWF had *always* been a company that changed with the times and gave the viewers what it wanted.

VINDICATION

Image is important to Vince McMahon but also to the WWF as a whole. Acknowledged as the creative head of the organization, the impact of McMahon's words reflects on the company and its success and failures. Therefore, it can be expected that McMahon's rhetoric will be consistent with his product.

Consider the words of Gerald Morton regarding the suspension of disbelief for characters in wrestling. During the 1992 steroid and sex scandal, McMahon was forced to address situations as the WWF president and not as a mere ring announcer as many fans saw him before that point. When the "Montreal screwjob" occurred, McMahon took the initial negative response and used it to help forge his character in the World Wrestling Federation storylines.

McMahon has adopted a brash and unapologetic persona onscreen. Most often portrayed as a heel, he is unforgiving and self-serving. I do not suggest that he wishes to portray these as characteristics of his "real life" persona. He even attempts to differentiate himself from this character at times; shrugging off negative publicity implications: "Playing Mr. McMahon is just a hoot" (Blaustein, 2000). What is important to note is that McMahon employs a rhetoric that is consistent with the product that he presents. He always articulates a concern for "WWF fans" as if they are his most important audience.

McMahon wants to be identified as a man of the people when he addresses his public as WWF chairman. Yet his persona cannot be "soft." If professional wrestling is indeed a "male soap opera" (Mazer, 1998), then perhaps how McMahon addresses corporate crises reflects the masculine values of today's North American society. This

subsequently may reflect implications on the theory of corporate apologia and image restoration.

The action justification model— if used consistently— may reflect a greater desire on a business person's behalf to be assertive in their role as a leader. Given McMahon's status amongst his fans as a "creative genius", it may also reflect a belief that masculine qualities reflect a leader. This would be consistent with the managerial stereotypes held by young Americans and the nation in general (Carli & Eagly, 1999, Powell, Butterfield & Parent, 2002)

Wrestling is composed of "babyfaces" and "heels." The specifics of the situations portrayed are often secondary to the characters that are involved and the audience's attachment. It is therefore fitting that McMahon's rhetoric is similar. He does not focus on the absolutive: addressing the mechanics of the actions, whether or not they happened and their implications. He instead works to vindicate himself among a cast of characters in each situation that is presented to him. Whether or not the actions are desirable, he wants the people to see him as "their" character. In the wrestling world, that requires an unapologetic and confrontational persona. In these categories, McMahon certainly qualifies.

THE FUTURE: VINCE MCMAHON AND FURTHER AVENUES OF STUDY

> If your life's work has been one of being satiated in the pantomime of pro wrestling, it must be difficult at times to know where acting ends and reality begins.
> (McGough, 1993).

> The character he plays in the wrestling ring began to overtake the sobersided businessman again...he sneered the way the Vince McMahon character would sneer on RAW Is WAR...What could these media people do to him? He had built one empire without them, and now he would build another..."I've been married to him for 34 years," Linda McMahon said quietly in the back of the tent. "Vince never walks away from confrontation."
> (Montville, 2001, p. 36).

Vince McMahon has demonstrated a clear preference for an unrepentant communication style in situations that allow for apology as an option. I have established a dual framework for Benoit's (1997) corporate apologia strategies: an action justification model (denial, evade responsibility and reduce offensiveness) and a remorse model (corrective action and mortification). McMahon clearly prefers the former style. He also more readily transforms community issues into competency issues for his defenses.

My remaining questions have been designed to reflect on McMahon's role to his audience. He possesses a unique status in the world of business: he is both a corporate chairman and an actor. He is responsible to stockholders but also caters to the youth of America. The following queries delve into the implications of how McMahon handles situations of crisis.

HOW HAS THIS AFFECTED THE CREATION AND RE-CREATION OF MCMAHON AS A CORPORATE FIGURE?

McMahon's discourse with the media has increased during his road to glory. At the same time, his responsibility of maintaining an image for the fans of his product increased as well. Once the "inactive" announcer that never acknowledged his ownership of the product unfolding before the audience, he transformed his day job into an onscreen character.

Are the character and the person one and the same? McMahon says "no" (Sales, 1998, Blaustein, 2000) but the perceived similarities between the two are impossible to ignore. For example, the audience's perception of characters on *Friends* differs somewhat from their perception of the actors. While they may associate a character's qualities with the actor, their perception of who the character is and why s/he behaves as s/he does on the show exists entirely within the context of the program itself. The external factors of the actor's life play very little in that interpretation. The characters within the show exist in a separate realm from its producers and performers.

Yet in McMahon's case, the audience's perception of the character came into existence *because* of the person. They are inextricably linked. "Mr. McMahon", the evil promoter trying to "screw over" the wrestlers that he does not like could not exist without Vince McMahon— the wrestling promoter who faced a long line of accusers throughout his career. Dave Meltzer claims that the "Mr. McMahon" character emerged out of the "Montreal screwjob" crisis: "He was getting booed. And he decided to go with the flow" (Sales, 1998, p. 45).

It is also worth noting that unlike any other form of scripted entertainment; there are no opening or closing credits to remind the audience of who the actors are versus who

the characters are. The character name, which is often different from the real name, is given the credit. As the movie *The Scorpion King* hits theaters, the audience does not pay to see Duane Johnson— who plays WWF wrestler "The Rock"— acting in another role. Instead, the banner reads that "the Rock" is in fact the actor in the film. Just the same, the audience is never reminded that Vince McMahon is reprising the "role" of "Mr. McMahon." They instead enter each show with an assumption of who he is and why he is that character.

This puts McMahon in a unique position whenever he is called upon to defend his company. His performance in the ring is projected onto the image of the World Wrestling Federation Entertainment chairman. The bravado of his character, whether intentionally or otherwise, transfers itself into media relations. McMahon's role as a popular culture figure has impact on how he has viewed as the WWF chairman.

As McMahon incorporated his corporate life into an onscreen persona, he created an added responsibility for himself. While not wanting to be presented as undesirable to the audience at large as the WWF head, he still wished to transform the negative connotations of crisis surrounding him into a heel character. So in answer to this question, McMahon's image as a corporate figure has been affected by a dichotomous situation in which he has chosen to place himself: Courting the admiration of the fans while parlaying negative elements of his perceived persona into a heel foil for other WWF characters.

HOW HAS MCMAHON MANAGED HIS ROLE AS WWF PRESIDENT OR CHAIR IN BALANCE WITH HIS ROLE AS A WWF PERFORMER?

McMahon's unique standing in popular culture provides a looking glass into corporate apologia as a performance. The public sees McMahon as a performer on WWF

programming. Yet popular culture is the not the only element of life in which performance studies can be made applicable. Personal narrative (Langellier, 1999) and patterns of organizational behavior (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983) have been identified as cultural representatives.

By observing these elements, we can gain a greater understanding of the personal culture of the narrator or the organization. In identifying a persona that the audience can identify with in McMahon's discourse, it is apparent that corporate apologia can also possess a performative function. I see identifying rituals or patterns in these situations as particularly important. Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo's (1983) view differs somewhat:

> In urging a focus on communication as performance, we mean that a researcher must determine the variety of episodes that constitute a particular kind of performance and must look historically at the "playing out" of successive episodes for the accretion of significance that constitutes the meaning of the culture. Most importantly, the research must respect the improvisational nature of performances and look not so much for their invariant patterns, but for the variability in their patterns instead (p. 146).

I disagree with the last sentence: I believe that invariant patterns can be identified and I feel that the apologia analysis of McMahon over five different crises demonstrates this. It is not a matter of identifying *identical* strategies, but *similar* strategies. These similar defenses— in this case, falling under the action justification model— may constitute a genre of performance or a set of expectations from the audience.

What I concur with is the importance of constructing the series of episodes that construct a performance. Wrestling is not unlike the corporate world McMahon is placed in: the audience reacts based on a continuing storyline. The WWE's storylines move

forth with a presumption of continuity from the previous week's action. Similarly, McMahon cannot avoid the perceptions that come with his brashness in past forays such as the XFL. They are ingrained as part of the audience's understanding of him in his future corporate appearances.

McMahon performs in the role of a corporate spokesperson in each example of crisis. With each situation, his role is more clearly defined for the audience because the expectations of apologia increase each time. In 1992, a great deal of the audience could not relate to McMahon as the WWF owner; they rarely saw him in that role. In 2002, the audience assumes it because of the popular culture representation.

Since he has been the most prominent member of the McMahons onscreen, the *product's* audience readily heeds Vince's words about subjects related to the company. Linda McMahon, president of World Wrestling Federation Entertainment, is often the one that handles questions about stock and business. She is more readily recognized as a voice to the stockholders. She is almost always quoted in the company's official press releases whereas Vince rarely speaks through this venue. Still, he is identified as the person who is *really* running the show. Even future rival Bret Hart states, "he's the driving force and creative genius behind the WWF" (Blake, Jay & Ostriker, 1998). Vince, Linda and children Shane and Stephanie have all portrayed themselves onscreen at one point or another. Yet Vince's character came long before the other three and at the present time, only Vince's character remains.

His heel character sometimes betrays him as he attempts ventures as the businessman. Balancing the roles is not an easy task. The XFL venture in particular is evidence of this. The media was especially willing to pick up on similarities between the

McMahon at a press conference and the vindictive "Mr. McMahon." Montville (2001) wrote of McMahon's attitude after the XFL premiere— "A familiar pop-eyed look of defiance came across Vince McMahon's face. He started to pick a fight" (p. 36). Mick Foley (2001), a WWE employee for over five years, remarks "(he) is the one guy in the company who feels compelled to become a wrestling character whenever a camera light turns on" (p. 468).

The tempting inference to make from this example is that McMahon operates in popular culture primarily through his character and not through his role as chairman. After all, the reporter seems to react with expectations of the TV character's persona. Yet McMahon's behavior in the launching of XFL (telling Wall Street to "kiss his ass") remained in perfect consistency with this anticipation.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that both news and entertainment media forms serve similar functions as a co-operative. "News and entertainment both tell us something about the world...they make up a significant symbolic environment...(they) tell us who is important, how to behave, and what the new trends are" (p. 31). McMahon is not only seen by millions every week as Mr. McMahon but has been seen on such programs as ESPN's *Outside the Lines*, HBO's *On the Record*, and— in Canada— TSN's *Off the Record*. These appearances are all part of McMahon's media repertoire.

The breadth of media studies is vast and imposing. It can be argued that media criticism can never quite exist in a vacuum separate from other criticisms as many theorists choose to apply other forms of criticism to a specific genre of media (as discussed earlier). Mass communication studies concern themselves with a variety of elements of message as described by Alexander and Hanson (1997):

> we seek to better comprehend both the nature of communication— such as who creates and sends the message, what is communicated, how, and with what result- and the role of the media as agents in the distribution of special types of message, such as what changes as media "comes between" the sender(s) and the receiver(s) of the messages (p. xv).

McMahon has more control over the creation and transmission of messages as a performer. After all, he is the chairman of WWF programming. Yet it is interesting to observe what little changes in McMahon's persona occur despite the change in "sender." When the media presents McMahon, he is a calculating, unrepentant businessman. When his own company presents him as a character, the result is the same.

So how does McMahon balance his role as a performer (where he wishes to be an antagonist) and his role as a chairman (where he wishes to be a protagonist)? The answer is in the narrative. As a TV character, McMahon acts as the foil for other heroic figures. Whereas in the corporate setting, he finds the proper foil to transform him into the hero.

For example, in his past narrative, McMahon cast himself as "David" against the "Goliath" of Ted Turner. Some detractors openly claimed that McMahon did this purposely for reasons other than stating the facts. In 1998, then-WCW President Eric Bischoff stated that McMahon placed himself on the same plateau as Turner to assuage his ego. He further claimed, "I kind of think if Vince were to walk into Ted Turner's office, someone would have to remind Ted who Vince is" (Schlosser, 1998).

McMahon insisted that his disdain for Turner was not carefully constructed but instead came from a genuine rift between the two: "Ted and I do *not* get along" (Sales, 1998, p. 40). The image that he projected was clear: Turner was the corporate conglomerate profiting off of the WWF's efforts. Turner was operating with the sole dishonorable intent of displacing the WWF because of a personal vendetta.

WHAT CULTURAL VALUES DOES MCMAHON REFLECT WITH HIS MANAGEMENT OF THESE ROLES?

The final research question is complex. McMahon's persona garners favor from his fans. Yet onscreen, he is a heel. His apologia discourse is just one element of his corporate persona, which plays into his performance persona— and vice versa. It is important to understand that while McMahon may represent a certain cultural value, the tapestry in which he performs weekly is presenting a myriad of values. Wrestling is a form of popular culture. Other WWF characters and the reactions they elicit demonstrate the cultural value of the audience.

Wrestling as Popular Culture

On March 17, 2002, this author personally attended the WWF's signature event, *Wrestlemania X8*, in Toronto, Ontario. As the effeminate tag team champions, Billy and Chuck, made their way to the ring, a fan muttered "They better not have those faggots win." The four-way elimination tag team match was narrowed down to the champions and the Hardy Boyz— a popular team with female fans but not with many of the males sitting around me. "Fags vs. fags!", shouted one fan derogatorily as the match continued. Billy and Chuck emerged victorious and the crowd of over 68,000 voiced their displeasure at the decision. Meanwhile, this author spotted a sign near the front row from two defiant fans stating "Billy and Chuck are straight!" as they celebrated the duo's win.

This example points out just one example of the value systems that are reflected in the WWF. While some have written about the homoeroticism inherent in professional wrestling (Mazer, 1998), one tried-and-true gimmick is playing upon fans' homophobia with effeminate characters. From the days of Gorgeous George to the outlandish Goldust in the late 1990s and today, wrestling fans have often voiced their displeasure for those

male characters that do not fulfill masculinity to their liking. No character has ever been openly gay yet there has always been implied homosexuality in certain characters that fans have reacted against. Even the fans celebrating Billy and Chuck's win seem to reflect this. They insist not on the fans approving of a homosexual team, but rather suggest that it is absurd to suggest the team's members are homosexual in the first place.

Berger (1995) describes the scholastic interest in popular culture: "Scholars who study popular culture are not concerned primarily with aesthetic matters; instead, their interest is in the role that popular culture plays in society— the ideological messages contained in popular culture" (p. 161). Professional wrestling fits the description of an element of culture that contains ideological messages while being communicated to the masses. The Billy and Chuck scenario is only one example.

McMahon describes WWF programming as "populist TV" (Schlosser, 1998, p. 26). Consistent with his competency approach, he stresses the importance of giving the audience what it wants and changing with the times. Especially when operating at its height of popularity, wrestling is an important reflection of its time, not only through television programming but also in merchandise and apparel. The ideological values of storylines and characters vary but there is no denying the effect that the value systems that can be reflected in the WWF product.

For instance, the late 1990s saw a rise in rebellious characters that might have drawn negative reactions in another era. As the nWo took over WCW, some fans did not boo and hiss but instead queued up for their T-shirts. Author of The Buzz on Professional Wrestling (2001), Scott Keith describes the Steve Austin-Vince McMahon

feud that revived the WWF in 1998 as "Rebel v. Boss as allegory for the communist revolution" (May 26, 2002).

Vince McMahon is viewed as the ringleader of this important popular culture event. His largest audience has traditionally been young males (Mazer, 1998, Monk 2000). The value systems reflected on WWF programming, but also through McMahon's general public conduct, are primarily then reflective of their values. There are two fields of study that demonstrate the importance of gender in his discourse: media analysis and mythic criticism.

Media Studies

Before the term "sports entertainment" saturated the public, many media critics looked at wrestling in a similar fashion to Gerbner's (1977) *cultivation* theory. This focuses on the relationship between mass media's presentation of "reality" and what the audience perceives to be "reality." This relationship is even reflected upon in comments from performers such as Jerry Lawler: "It's a real life soap opera" (Mortense, 1998).

I argue that the role of the audience in shaping the product must not be ignored. The cultivation theory does not take into account how people affect the programming's take on reality, only vice-versa. Professional wrestling is based largely on fan interaction. The statement "filmed before a live studio audience" is not a cliché for wrestling: it drives the product.

If the product does not conform to the reaction of its audience, it will likely fail. A specific example of this occurred as WWFE attempted to relaunch WCW in the summer of 2001. On a July 2 episode of *RAW*, the company featured a WCW match that drew crowd apathy that was visible to the television audience. Chants of "this match

sucks" occurred and many people left the arena while the cameras were rolling. The company radically shifted the storyline to include the ECW brand name only one week later. The WCW experiment had failed because of the participants— and the live audience was part of that participation.

The most relevant media studies approach then is the uses and gratifications approach. This theory "suggests that media users are active rather than passive and are selective in their choices of media experience" (Berger, 1995, p. 151). This approach seeks to find what viewers/readers seek in media: what are they *getting out of it* that brings them back? Consider the analysis of *A Clockwork Orange* by Elsaesser (1976) and how the audience gleans satisfaction from reinscribing their own value systems:

> The spectator recognizes the negative experiences, the failures and disappointments of his own everyday life...on the other hand, the sentimentality enshrines and reinstates those feelings, hopes and wish-fulfilling dreams whose impossibility and failure the cynicism confirms. This in itself is a vicious circle, but one that gives pleasure because of the way it validates the spectator's personal experience ('yes, I know, that's how it is') (p. 195).

Elsaesser describes how realism can lend to the popularity of a text regardless (or perhaps because) of how disturbing or violent it may be. In this case, the audience approaches the film *wanting* something but not necessarily "mindless entertainment." Whatever dissatisfaction the audience has about the "real world" can be transferred towards the media it consumes.

To extend beyond the WWF product itself, the question about McMahon is: what is it about his media persona that keeps fans coming back? How does McMahon overcome the negativity of his feud with the Hart family and the onslaught of media critics? These conflicts seem to drive McMahon more than detract from his supporters' concept of him.

McMahon's steering away from the remorseful apologia strategies reflects values of aggressiveness and assertion that his audience holds. Even as McMahon puts the shoe on the other foot by opposing the rebel through his onscreen character, he fulfills the same audience need. He even acknowledges the values of the Austin-McMahon storyline as a reflection of his views on his own life:

> After you really get to know me...you'll see that Stone Cold is really playing the part of Vince McMahon...it's ironic that I now play an authority figure...although it's easy for me to. I know all the right buttons to push because I've been there, on the flip side of it (pp. 42-43).

McMahon's behavior both in the portrayal of rebellion in WWF programming and in his unapologetic corporate discourse meets a specific mythic need. Gerald Morton argues "we are an age without a mythology" and that wrestling can provide society with the myths by which to base its values on (Mortense, 1998). McMahon places himself in the role of the hero.

Mythic Criticism and Masculinity

Sharing Morton's view, Berger (1995) writes that myth is "a narrative that, among other functions, serves to connect individuals to their cultures" (p. 122). One can observe professional wrestling as a ritualistic performance of metaphors and myths, and Chisholm (1991) observes any media narrative can tap into an audience's sense of values.

Myth is often inherent in media criticism. Myth and ideology are closely linked and many media analyses discuss the ideology of the culture that spawns the text. Hay (1992) establishes that "culture is as much a terrain of shared ways of seeing as it is one of competing and conflicting ideologies" (p.371) and discusses how gender studies of media have incorporated myth: "Ideological theory has offered a means of considering

how the conventionalization of televisual signs and narratives produce stereotypes, myths and ideologies of male/female differences" (p. 371).

There is a great deal of mythic criticism that relates present texts to ancient myths. However, Austin (1990) states that myth "though determined in form by its immediate historical context, transcends any historical moment, being at the fundamental level the quest for the self" (p. 2). Qualter (1962) echoes this thought pattern, although he discusses myth as a guiding force for one shaping the masses' beliefs. Myth becomes a simplifier in determining one's values because "the myth is intangible, it is easier to mold than fact, although it is still as real as life itself to those who believe in it" (p. 52). Both viewpoints echo the opinion that texts are exchanges leading to meaning. The myths enforced by the rhetor are important to investigate but one must also look at the ideology engrained in the reader of the text.

Ideology informs *myth making*. Warner (1994) investigates the myth-making of the male by males in video games and comics (pp. 25-42). She focuses on the violence expressed in these media. Fontenrose (1971) concurs that myth construction builds ritual but is also informed by ritual- there is a cycle of behavior: "the myth suggests additions to the rite (thus helping to build a ritual drama), and the rite suggests additions to or interpolations in the myth" (p. 50).

One concept strongly informed by myth is that of the "hero." The hero has almost always prototypically been male and subsequently the construction of him has come to represent masculinity to its society. Lash (1995) discusses the "heroic configuration" in mythological history:

> Foremost in the heroic configuration is virility, the essence of the masculine sex. The hero is undeniably he, the male of the human species...his career is turbulent and controversial because virility is close kin to violence— perhaps its dark, unruly twin (p. 5).

McMahon has made his living by promoting violence— albeit in a rehearsed fashion. He performs to a certain expectation of masculinity both onscreen and off. Sometimes his character acts a foil to someone portraying that ideal. Former WWF wrestler Del Wilkes comments on the anti-hero character of Steve Austin: "You take any young teenager who's filled with testosterone and that's the attitude he wants to have" (Mortense, 1998). McMahon allowed Austin's rebellious character to evolve in opposition to "Mr. McMahon"— who would always try to force Austin to conform and never succeed.

He surrounds himself with controversy willingly. If there is no controversy surrounding him, he courts it:

> He wants the WWF to be thought of as the Oakland Raiders of the wrestling world— mean, tough and dirty, with wrestlers who are "bad-ass characters and renegades."..."Please say that we are out of control, please say that," he says. "What we are trying to do is give people the perception that we just might be out of control...The more our competitors talk about how aggressive we are, the bad language and all of that, the better off we'll be" (Schlosser, 1998, p. 26).

McMahon asks for challenges to his reputation and thrives on confrontation. Thus virility cannot be far behind. There are signs of sexual proclivity portrayed in persona both on and offscreen. His character once described himself as the "genetic jackhammer." Even as he acknowledges he expresses remorse over his previous extra-martial affairs, there is still the sign of the virility cherished by his young male audience:

"One minute he volunteers intimate details about his marriage (he cheated repeatedly—'It's not something I'm proud of'). The next, he squeezes the arm of his publicist, saying, 'I could be better at patting others on the back, right, pal?'" (Rosellini, 1999, p. 55).

McMahon's character and persona reflect virility and violence. The audience would not have it any other way. Even as they boo him, he is their hero. He allows them to see how they would like to treat their bosses. Yet at the same time, they envision themselves acting as he would were *they* the bosses.

MCMAHON TODAY

Even recent examples in both McMahon's character and corporate persona demonstrate that McMahon performs to this expectation. He is forceful, virile and unapologetic.

Join the Club

The failed WCW vs. WWF storyline finally resolved itself in November 2001. "Mr. McMahon's" WWF prevailed over "the Alliance" of his children Shane and Stephanie. The company then began a storyline in which McMahon, consumed with arrogance upon vanquishing the opposition, demanded that certain employees kiss his posterior in order so they could keep their jobs. One wrestler actually performed the task while heel characters forced others to do so. This was to re-establish McMahon as a lead heel in the company.

The Vince McMahon "kiss my ass club" angle was met with great resistance and eventually subsided. Yet his character continues to assert his power into 2002. The current "Mr. McMahon" character runs the *Smackdown* brand of programming. In a May 9, 2002 episode, he asks a group of wrestlers to perform a beatdown of his enemy while

his leggy young female assistant watches approvingly. Sexual tension between he and this assistant is played out through a variety of backstage sketches.

Get the "F" Out

The WWF recently underwent a drastic change as the company changed to WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment). This has been accompanied by a slight modification to the WWF logo as well as a campaign titled "Get the 'F' Out." The move was inspired by a long running legal tussle with the World Wildlife fund over the initials "W.W.F." The difference between Vince McMahon and his wife in their public discussion of the event offers an indication of how his persona remains one of defiance.

In the company's press release (May 6, 2002), Linda McMahon stated, "we will utilize this opportunity to position ourselves emphasizing the entertainment aspect of our company, and, at the same time, allay the concerns of the Fund." Contrarily, Vince, in a televised interview stated that the move came from "bad settlements" on his part and the Wildlife Fund "had no sense of humor" (Balsmeyer, 2002). One media critic wonders if the change had been necessitated by confrontational ego:

> While the U.K. lawsuit only affected the WWF's use of the name overseas, they decided to change everywhere in order to keep the brand consistent worldwide (or because Vince McMahon is a stubborn mule who would rather force his customers to remember a new brand name than lose a court case, you decide) (Schatz, 2002).

RE-CATEGORIZING CORPORATE APOLOGIA

The value of masculinity as inscribed by the consistent aggressiveness of McMahon's approach is evident. The total of action justification strategies outnumbers the remorse strategies 12 to 3 over the course of five crises. Furthermore, the uses of

remorse strategies are more isolated and not replicated in a number of areas whereas many of the action justification strategies are supported by consistent examples.

The replicated use of these strategies— particularly McMahon's reliance on reducing the offensiveness of an event— also correspond to his persona. The exterior mannerisms are consistent with the defense. This indicates that there is a possible cultural meaning to the strategies used. Do people expect corporations to use more action justification strategies *only* when its shareholders or leaders feel that they absolved from blame? This question cannot be answered without delving into the potential meanings of the categories suggested.

The action justification model is not only enacted through the specific strategies but with a persona that matches them. This creates a fuller picture of the model. McMahon's charisma is such that it commands the attention of the critic to see how the chairman is buffering his role with his performance. He is often clearly upset when he is questioned by media "opposition" and his belief that he is not in the wrong comes across in his physical presentation. This is one of my motivations in creating the divisions for Benoit's (1997) strategies.

McMahon manages his image not only by being confrontational over the subject matter but also by expressing disdain for his "adversary." As he argues with a reporter about the Owen Hart incident, it is important for the critic to *view* the exchange. McMahon's often aggressive demeanor reflects a performativity that cannot be translated by merely assessing his words.

IMPLICATIONS

Critics' foci on apologia and image restoration have ranged from the appropriateness of a strategy dependent on the situation (Coombs, 1995) or on the importance of the strategies in appeasing stockholders (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Yet it seems that no one has yet discussed the performativity of apologia.

The result of these collective performances— an enactment of the myth of the hero— suggests an implication for apologia studies: categories as reflective of cultural value. Crises create an expectation from the audience: The expectation is that the party deemed responsible will in fact respond in some way. McMahon is now expected to fire back at critics; he is not expected to apologize.

Thus, apologia acts not just as a defense mechanism for his company. It is part of his performance as Vince McMahon. The decisions he makes within the spectrum of choice in Benoit's model are consistent with his persona. Therefore, I argue that future research on corporate apologia not only look at the restoration or maintenance a company's image, but also at how a leader performs to expectations of his or her role in midst of defense. If the action justification model draws a more favorable reaction than the remorse model does with a certain audience, then there are clearly value implications in image restoration.

FUTURE AVENUES OF STUDY ON THE SUBJECT

In studying Vince McMahon, there are three areas that are still open for study. The first is to analyze McMahon's role within popular culture. As the rebellious Steve Austin ran roughshod in the WWF ring, the ratings rose. Now WWE programming is

gradually declining in popularity. There is an indication that wrestling is perhaps being repositioned in the strata of North American culture.

The second avenue worthy of further analysis is McMahon's role in the media. Wrestling has always been a cyclical form of entertainment and can serve as a media form that represents its time well. While the audience for WWE programming is shrinking, it is still substantial. What does McMahon's audience seek from him as a leader of their favorite product? Is there a failure to meet a certain standard that might lead to a disinterest in his onscreen character?

This question is less suited to rhetorical study and is can be further explored through uses and gratification research. Wrestling programming has been dissected in studies before (most notably and recently by Dr. Walter Gantz at University of Indiana in 1999). Yet this has been done without consulting the audience itself on its interpretation of content. This led to a dispute over the results of the Indiana study from wrestler Mick Foley (2001), who disagreed with the coding system employed by Gantz. I believe that McMahon's role in the eyes of wrestling's audience can be better defined by employing an extensive audience analysis or audience-based approach.

Last, the implications of McMahon as a corporate figure have not been fully discussed. I reiterate that McMahon's role as WWE chairman and as a WWE character creates a unique case for organizational study. While this does not necessarily mean that the analyses would be applicable to other corporate apologia situations, it would broaden the scope of the genre. Zarefsky (1998) argues for the merit of individual case studies:

> Does it follow...that studies of individual cases (the primary work of the historian) are suspect because they do not yield general knowledge? Not necessarily...individual cases do contribute *to* theory. They suggest models, norms, or exemplars; they offer perspective by incongruity on the ordinary cases (p. 25).

A more thorough analysis of McMahon's entire career and modification of roles both onscreen and off could make for interesting research on leadership in organizations over a prolonged period of time. Such research could validate the proposed duality of Benoit's model or, at the very least, provide an exception to the rule for corporate discourse.

CONCLUSION

In 1972, a young Vince McMahon was sent by his father to promote professional wrestling in the "wrestling exile" of Bangor, Maine (Sales, 1998, p. 44). Almost 30 years later, he is the chairman of a company that produces television programming in 110 countries and eight different languages (Schlosser, 1998, p. 23). He is considered the most influential and successful person in the history of the business.

As the 21st century moves forward, Vince McMahon has a new challenge placed before him. In the past, he has been able to craft an enemy through a rival promotion (WCW). In the present, his company faces no major opposition in wrestling world. The World Wrestling Allstars promotion remains largely unnoticed. As of this writing, the National Wrestling Alliance has launched a weekly pay-per-view venture (http://www.nwatna.com) but have no plans for cable or network television.

The late-1990s uproar about "Attitude" no longer makes for the major media story that it once did. In fact, the WWE recently settled a court case with the Parents Television Council (http://www.parentstv.org/Main/letters/wweretraction.asp) thus

ending a public relations war between McMahon and PTC chair Brent Bozell. Not only has this attention decreased, but top WWE star, the Rock, has decreased appearances due to success in Hollywood while "Stone Cold" Steve Austin left the promotion in a heated dispute. Ratings for WWE programming have gradually slid and McMahon has conceded that his company may simply have to cope with "ups and downs" of wrestling business (Balsmeyer, 2002).

Whether or not McMahon and the WWE remain a flourishing success (as they were in the 1980s and late 1990s) or they are in a downswing, he will always provide a fascinating example for rhetorical criticism. Benoit and Brinson (1994) highlight the importance of corporations taking a "indirect or preventive approach designed to cope with general negative feelings toward the company" (p. 76). The WWE engages in such measures as providing a website for parents and highlighting charitable efforts in order to keep the company's image as positive even in situations where a crisis is not impending.

Yet McMahon specifically rarely seems to engage in such dialog. The "Mr. McMahon" character and Vince McMahon, WWE chairman, continue to influence each other. He aims to justify the intent behind each and every action that he commits— both on and off screen. As Meltzer stated, his trustworthiness may always be in doubt, but his power in popular culture is assured for a long time to come.

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