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# **Global Capitalism Meets National Spirit**

## **Discourses in Media Texts on a Cross-Border Acquisition**

JANNE TIENARI

*Lappeenranta University of Technology, Finland*

EERO VAARA

*École Management de Lyon, France*

INGMAR BJÖRKMAN

*Swedish School of Economics, Finland*

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## **Abstract**

In this article, the authors explore media coverage of a recent acquisition across national borders. Their starting point is that the media represent a key arena of “discursive strategizing” for actors such as corporate managers. They illustrate and specify how global capitalism, as discourse relying on economic and financial rationale and exemplified here by the acquiring firm’s attempts to expand, meets national spirit, exemplified here by the complexity in selling the acquisition target to foreigners. The main contribution of this study lies in identifying how key actors draw on and mobilize rationalistic and nationalistic discourses in public discussion. The analysis illustrates that the same actors can draw on different—even contradictory—discourses at different points in time. Furthermore, different actors—even with opposing objectives—may draw on the same discourse in legitimizing their positions and pursuing specific ends.

**Keywords:** media; discourse; acquisitions; global; nationalism

Although research on the media is relatively scarce in management and organization studies, it is clear that the media reflect existing ideas and construct reality around specific management concepts, organizations, and projects (Mazza & Alvarez, 2000). We know that various types of discourse play an important role in these complex processes and that discursive resources can be mobilized for specific purposes (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). We know much less, however, about the ways in which specific actors, such as corporate managers, make use of discursive resources in the media to further their strategies.

In our view, cross-border acquisitions present a particularly salient context for analyzing the formation of discursive strategies in the media. International acquisitions recently have been very popular. They often involve a number of stakeholders and create a great deal of public interest. Prior management and organization studies have shown that discourses relying on financial and economic rationale, reflecting the ideas of global capitalism, tend to dominate the discussions around acquisitions (Vaara, 2002; Vaara & Tienari, 2002). Previous research has also shown that national identity and nationalism can play important roles in the construction of reality in acquisition processes (Hellgren et al., 2002). Prior studies have not, however, focused in-depth on the discursive strategies of the actors involved—either as protagonists or antagonists—in specific acquisition projects.

Therefore, the research question addressed in this article is “how do actors make use of discursive strategies and resources in public discussion in pursuing and resisting international acquisitions?” Our media analysis identifies and specifies the discursive resources available and sheds light on how and why the same actors may draw on different—even contradictory—discourses at different times. Furthermore, it shows how different actors—even with opposing objectives—may draw on the same discourse in legitimizing their positions and pursuing specific ends. For the purposes of this analysis, we develop the concept of discursive strategizing.

In our view, the ongoing restructuring and transformation within the financial services industry provides a fruitful field for research on media texts. Banks and other financial services companies are key players in global capitalism. In the emergent cross-border merger and acquisition activity in financial services in Europe, Nordea—the new group name for a major Nordic corporation—may be considered a significant forerunner. The bank group was built through a series of domestic and cross-border mergers and acquisitions, and its core now includes a Swedish, Finnish, Danish, and Norwegian financial services company. We

examine in-depth the prolonged process in which Nordea acquired Christiania Bank og Kreditkasse, in which the Norwegian State held a major share. Texts in the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish press are used to make sense of the acquisition process and the discourses drawn on by key actors.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS**

Management and organization research on mergers and acquisitions reflects a range of different traditions. Since the 1960s, mergers and acquisitions have been studied from a strategic perspective, with close links to economics and, later, finance theory. Most studies from this perspective have concentrated on the decision-making processes and the performance effects of acquisitions (cf. Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991; Kitching, 1967; Pablo, 1994). These studies have typically been based on attempts to understand management as a rational, unified agent solving organizational problems.

Studies adopting a human resource management perspective have provided a contrast to the more strategically oriented analyses. These studies have often sympathized with employee concerns in the emergent, merger-related change processes and closely examined employee reactions leading to compliance or resistance to change (e.g., Cartwright & Cooper, 1990; Greenwood, Hinings, & Brown, 1994; Napier, 1989; Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991; Schweiger, Ivancevich, & Power, 1987). Closely linked to these studies, with the rise of a more general interest in the study of culture since the early 1980s, researchers started to explore mergers and acquisitions from a cultural perspective (e.g., Buono, Bowditch, & Lewis, 1985; Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, 1988). Accordingly, a growing stream of studies has emerged with a focus on cultural differences and contradictions at organizational and national levels (e.g., Calori, Lubatkin, & Very, 1994; Gertsen, Söderberg, & Torp, 1998; Lubatkin, Calori, Very, & Veiga, 1998; Olie, 1994). Related to these topics, researchers have also examined mergers and acquisitions from the perspective of organizational justice (Meyer, 2001a; Very, Lubatkin, & Calori, 1998), ambiguity (Risberg, 1999), organizational politics (Vaara, 2001), and gender (Tienari, 2000).

Management and organizational scholars have also been interested in the wider societal consequences of mergers and acquisitions and/or adopted an inherently critical perspective. For example, Davis and Stout (1992) and Thornton (1995) considered acquisitions as examples of social movements and fashions, rather than predominantly well-

planned moves by rational actors. There is also emerging interest on the discursive elements of mergers and acquisitions. Important studies have been carried out by Hirsch (1986) and Hirsch and Andrews (1983), examining the metaphors and vocabularies of hostile takeovers. Schneider and Dunbar (1992) presented a psychoanalytic reading of texts in hostile takeover events. Vaara (2002) examined the discursive construction of success and failure in decision-makers' accounts of mergers and acquisitions. Vaara and Tienari (2002) studied specific types of discourse through which the changes involved in mergers and acquisitions were justified, legitimized, and naturalized in the media. Hellgren et al. (2002) analyzed how the media constructs and reconstructs specific issues in the merger context through interpretations of winning and losing.

## **TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF DISCURSIVE STRATEGIZING IN THE INTERNATIONAL ACQUISITION CONTEXT**

We view discourse as part of (organizational) action. Discourses define and redefine what is justified and legitimate. They can be conceptualized as sets of texts that bring an object into being (Hardy et al., 2000). Following Fairclough's (1997) ideas on critical discourse analysis, we consider discourses an inherent part of sociocultural practices that are embedded in social and societal contexts. Consequently, we suggest that actors can draw on specific discourses and discursive resources to legitimate their positions and achieve particular ends.

Among others, Barry and Elmes (1997) have paved the way for a discursive and narrative understanding of strategy making. In this perspective, strategy is about language that is constructed to persuade others toward certain understandings and actions. Barry and Elmes (1997) argued for a strategy-as-story perspective and suggested that "rhetorical analysis can reveal how strategies (and strategists) assume authority" (p. 447) in different contexts. Dunford and Jones (2000) looked at the management of strategic change through narratives that provide a portrayal of events surrounding the change, with a particular focus on interpretations provided by managers. Hardy et al. (2000), in turn, pointed out how actors are able to access and mobilize different discourses to generate new meanings that help—or hinder—the enactment of particular strategies. The central point made by Hardy et al. (2000) is that discourses can be activated, performed, and connected in a process in which the actors strive for specific goals.

We attempt to extend these ideas and talk about discursive strategizing when actors mobilize specific discourses to pursue specific ends in international acquisitions. For this purpose, it is important to examine the relevant actors (and their positions) and the discursive resources mobilized by them. It should be emphasized, however, that such analyses are necessarily context specific. For example, what actors are relevant and whose voices are heard depend on the sociocultural situation and the issues at hand. In addition, particular discourses are enacted and, to a large extent, constituted in a specific process and context.

As to the actors, top managers and board members are of particular interest here. These actors have legitimate formal power to orchestrate the negotiations leading to acquisitions and the change processes following them. Their talk and actions are often the primary focus of media attention. For top managers, it is important to justify, gain acceptance for, and legitimize the initial merger or acquisition decision (or offer) and the subsequent initiatives for change. Employees and their representatives have traditionally provided the critical counterforce to the top decision makers. Union representatives are, at times, able to make their concerns heard in public discussion, for example, in relation to the employment concerns in acquisitions as managers' search for synergy benefits often leads to job losses (Vaara & Tienari, 2002).

The role of political actors and government officials seems to be seldom considered in organization and management studies focusing on media. Political forces in the form of competition officials can, however, have a crucial effect on the materialization of business deals, such as acquisitions. Recent examples testify to this. Among other actors, competition officials are, at times, active in public discussion. Government officials may also play an important role as the owner's representatives when state-owned companies are being privatized. Experts, such as economists and financial analysts, constitute yet another category of actors with a keen interest and role in acquisitions. They are often called on by the media to comment on key corporate decisions and strategies.

In the context of international acquisitions, what discourses are there to be mobilized by different actors? In the dominant business discourse and rhetoric, acquisitions are justified and legitimized as necessary and/or unavoidable (Vaara&Tienari, 2002). This is typically done in the name of creating benefits from economies of scale and scope; synergistic combination of units, functions, and processes; a focus on core competencies and competitiveness; and transfer of capabilities and knowledge. Mazza and Alvarez (2000)

elaborated on three sources of legitimacy in their analysis of how a specific management concept is treated in newspaper texts: conformity to corporate values, adoption by large firms, and successful performance. Much of what Mazza and Alvarez (2000) reported constitutes, in our view, a specific type of discourse. Topics such as strategic role, competitiveness, competitive weapons, effectiveness, responsiveness to future challenges, as well as links between practices and financial performance are used in reconstructing what can be called rationalistic discourse of global capitalism.

The necessity and unavoidability of acquisitions can become subject to scrutiny when viewed within discursive frameworks' alternative to the dominant, rationalistic one. What discourses are then likely to emerge as alternatives to the rationalistic discourse in cross-border acquisitions? What we find particularly conspicuous within this context is that nationalistic sentiments often seem to come to the forefront (Hellgren et al., 2002; Vaara & Tienari, 2002). In public discussion, the companies in question may become associated with national interests. It seems, however, that the nature and characteristics of nationalistic discourse rarely have been explicitly elaborated on in the merger or acquisition context vis-à-vis the apparently dominant rationalistic discourse.

In general, it is clear that Europe has been strongly affected by the forces of global capitalism and neoliberal politics in the post-cold war period. The continued liberalization (deregulation) of markets and privatization of previously state-owned enterprises testify to this. However, it also seems evident that nationalism has undergone a revival in this context (see, for example, Lyons & Breakwell, 1996). Explicit nationalist articulations can, at least, partly be thought to be critical reactions to business-led globalization.

We build on the idea that the meaning of *nation* is socially constructed. Nationalistic discourse is historically located, and nationalist sentiments are enacted in everyday talk. As Anderson's (1983) seminal work suggests, nations can be construed as imagined communities. Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism is particularly useful here. He argued that the construct of nation is often accepted and reproduced mindlessly and uncritically and rendered possible by mundane habits of language, thought, and symbolism. For example, when the term *we* is used to refer to a specific national collectivity, the speaker and the audience are involved in the myriad of processes reconstructing the nation. De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) examined topics, discursive strategies, and linguistic devices that, on one hand, are employed to construct national sameness and uniqueness, and on the other

hand distinctions and differences from other national collectives. De Cillia et al. (1999) argued that as specific forms of social identities, national identities are “discursively, by means of language and other semiotic systems, produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed” (p. 153).

It is probable that the media—the popular press, for example—can be effective in reinforcing nationalism and national identity in somewhat surprising contexts. Brookes’s (1999) analysis of texts in the British press on what has been labeled the mad cow disease exemplifies this. In addition, in evoking nationalistic sentiments, the media may draw from social domains, such as sports (e.g., Boyle & Haynes, 1996) or war and battle (e.g., Hirsch & Andrews, 1983; Risberg, Tienari, & Vaara, 2003). In general, the media legitimizes particular ideas and practices by linking them to socially accepted representations of reality, to a set of generally accepted norms and values (Mazza, 1998; cf. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Particular associations thereby enhance an emotional involvement in business issues (cf. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Furthermore, acquisitions across national boundaries are often considered within a framework of winning and losing. In this framework, it typically becomes natural to identify national sides in the media (cf. Hellgren et al., 2002). Acquisitions can thus be seen as manifestations of underlying cognitive and emotional interpretations of the historical relationships between the respective nations and nationalism (cf. Anderson, 1983; De Cillia et al., 1999). This can be linked with themes such as national heritage, superiority, and inferiority, and/or postcolonialization (Langer, 2000; Risberg et al., 2003). In all, discourse related to nations may work as a counterforce to the rationalistic discourse in media texts. To analyze this, we now turn to our empirical case.

## **METHOD AND DATA**

Due to its exploratory nature, this article is rich in empirical description. We base our work on critical discourse analysis as exemplified by Fairclough (1997) and De Cillia et al. (1999). We employ a version of an “interdisciplinary approach that combines historical, socio-political and linguistic perspectives” (De Cillia et al., 1999, p. 157) in locating and situating texts and discourses in their context. The prolonged acquisition process of the Norwegian Christiania Bank og Kreditkasse (henceforth CBK) by Nordea is examined in detail. At the time of the initial offer in September 1999, the acquirer was called Merita-

Nordbanken (MNB), consisting of a Swedish and Finnish bank. When the acquisition of CBK was agreed on in October 2000, the acquirer was called Merita-Nordbanken Unidanmark, following the merger between MNB and Unidanmark (Denmark) in March 2000. The name Nordea was introduced in the beginning of 2001.

Our point of departure is that it is an analytical task to specify and illustrate discourses and the related actors' discursive strategies in the media. The analysis presented is thus subject to critical scrutiny. We do not intend to search for ultimate truths, neither do we regard our work as exhaustive. Rather, we hope to offer plausible, coherent, and theoretically grounded interpretations on discourses and their use. We view individual media texts as incomplete in the sense that meaning is constructed only when the reader connects texts to other texts (Fiske, 1989; Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998). Intertextuality is thus a basis for our readings; texts are, in a sense, constituted from other already produced texts (cf. Fairclough, 1997). We attempt to illustrate ways in which this takes place. This entails sufficiently large sets of data. The material analyzed consists of press coverage in Norway, Sweden, and Finland following MNB's initial offer to acquire CBK in September 1999 until the final acceptance of the acquisition in October 2000.

The Norwegian material comprises articles published in *Dagbladet*, a major daily newspaper (35 texts in all), *Verdens Gang*, the leading tabloid in Norway (53), and *Dagens Naeringsliv*, the leading daily business newspaper (42). The Swedish material consists of articles in *Dagens Nyheter*, a major daily newspaper (31), *Aftonbladet*, the leading tabloid (9), *Dagens Industri*, the leading daily business newspaper (35), *Veckans Affärer*, the leading weekly business magazine (4), and *Affärsvärlden*, the major monthly business magazine (5). The Finnish material comprises articles in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading daily newspaper (37), *Ilta-Sanomat*, the leading tabloid (5), *Kauppalehti*, the leading daily business newspaper (49), and *Talouselämä*, the leading weekly business magazine (5).

Our analysis proceeded in three main stages. First, we scanned the content in the media coverage, identified recurring topics and actors in the texts, and paid special attention to the similarities in and differences between the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish material. Second, we carried out a more in-depth discourse analysis on selected—in our view typical and revealing—individual texts from the material in each country. We concentrated on characteristic traces of rationalistic and nationalistic discourses as conceptualized in the literature discussed earlier (these discourses often intertwine in individual media texts). We

also considered how discourses relate to particular themes and actors' voices in the texts. Third, we explored in more detail the ways in which the two main discourses were drawn on (mobilized) by actors, repeating Stages 1 and 2 with this particular analytical lens. We concentrated on actors who seem to have occupied key positions in the media texts, especially in Norway.

## **DISCUSSION**

In the following, we first briefly outline the prolonged process of MNB's acquisition of CBK. We then specify rationalistic and nationalistic discourses in the press material. Finally, we illustrate ways in which particular actors make use of discursive strategies and resources in attempting to legitimize their positions and to pursue their ends in the international acquisition context.

### **A Prolonged Cross-Border Acquisition**

In the latter part of the 1980s, Norway was the first Nordic country to be hit by a crisis in the financial services sector (Reve, 1990). After the severe crisis, the Norwegian State controlled the largest banks in the country. CBK was the second largest bank after Den norske Bank. The Swedish Nordbanken and the Finnish Merita Bank, in turn, were each created by domestic mergers after the financial crises of the early 1990s in their respective banking sectors. The merger between Nordbanken and Merita in October 1997 led to the making of Merita-Nordbanken (MNB). This merger proved to be the beginning of the formation of a Nordic bank (also covering the Baltic Sea region).

On September 20, 1999, MNB released its offer to buy CBK for the equivalent of approx. U.S.\$2.7 billion, including an offer for the State of Norway to become a shareholder in the new bank. However, the acquisition process proved to be time-consuming. The Norwegian State held a 35% stake in CBK, and political decision makers were reluctant to give up control of the bank to foreigners. The Norwegian parliament had some time earlier decided on a policy that would maintain State ownership in major Norwegian financial institutions. Furthermore, according to Norwegian legislation, shareholders with 90% of the votes in the financial institution had to support the foreign acquirer before the acquisition could be accepted.

The Norwegian government immediately rejected MNB's initial offer in September 1999. The centreright minority government led by Christian Democrats pointed out that it wanted to guarantee that the largest Norwegian financial institutions would remain under domestic ownership. Other potential buyers appeared for CBK. Den norske Bank and Handelsbanken (Sweden) announced their interest, although no official offers were yet made. When MNB's initial offer period expired, the offer was extended, first until November 12, 1999, and then until December 3. Norwegian politicians made it clear that they wanted to keep a strong hold of the Norwegian banking system. Although they were working on the optimal banking solution, MNB renewed its offer several times.

A left-wing Labour Party minority government took office in Norway in March 2000. In mid-April 2000, MNB raised its offer for CBK and set April 28 as the deadline. The Norwegian minister of finance anticipated a reply before the summer vacation. At the end of May, the Norwegian government decided to sell its holding in CBK but rejected MNB's offer as too low. Speculations about other potential acquirers reemerged. Handelsbanken remained MNB's most serious competitor. In June 2000, MNB raised its offer once more. This offer—the eighth one—was to expire at the end of August.

The competition over CBK intensified in early autumn 2000. According to rumors in the market, four offers were made: in addition to MNB and Handelsbanken, Föreningsbanken (Sweden), and ING Bank (The Netherlands) were interested in acquiring CBK. In early October 2000, MNB renewed its offer once more. The deadline was now October 20. This was MNB's 10th—and final—extension of the offer to buy CBK. On October 16, 2000, it was announced that shareholders in CBK had accepted the acquisition offer.

### **Rationalistic Discourse**

What we call *rationalistic discourse* dominated most of the press coverage on the acquisition of CBK (other expressions used in media texts are Kreditkassen and Christiania). This was the case in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Within this discursive frame, the acquisition was set against the background of inevitable industrial restructuring and internationalization (globalization). In brief, three arguments dominated the discussions:

- the need for banks to grow and internationalize,
- the problems related to State ownership, and

- the synergies realized by the acquisition.

The need to grow and internationalize was a central theme in all three countries. The following example is from a Swedish tabloid: “Everyone in the banking business is confident nowadays that banks have to expand their operations across national borders to survive the competition” (*Aftonbladet*, October 16, 2000).

Typically, the reasons for the constant need to grow were not elaborated in-depth (“everyone . . . is confident”). Rather, this need was most often stated as a fact. The popular view advocated in the media seemed to have been that large banks can provide services more cost-effectively and thereby gain competitive advantage. According to the texts, growth is also beneficial to the shareholders, as it increases the value of the bank in the market. This is exemplified by the largest Finnish daily newspaper: “Particularly after the acquisition of Norwegian Christiania, Nordea will be a very compact and well-performing Nordic bank package, which might well be attractive to the world’s giant banks as an acquisition target or a potential partner. Developments like this significantly increase shareholder value” (*Helsingin Sanomat*, March 7, 2000).

The Norwegian banking system was often portrayed as being in dire need of reorganization. *Verdens Gang* (Norwegian tabloid): “Neither Kreditkassen nor Den norske Bank are today strong financial institutions. They are too small for that” (October 25, 1999). Alongside the active support and justification for the acquisition, there were also texts with less use of rational argumentation to convince the readers. The tone in these texts was markedly matter-of-fact, as a Finnish example illustrated: “It is typical of modern times that mergers have become a sort of way of life, an essential part of business management. In the integrating markets it is better to buy than to be bought. Acquisitions are the only avenue for expansion in the banking sector” (*Helsingin Sanomat*, March 5, 2000). It is becoming customary to portray mergers and acquisitions (often used interchangeably) as a “sort of a way of life” in industries where the overall global volume of business is not likely to grow. Ever more often, the fundamental rationale in merging and acquiring itself “in the integrating markets” does not need to be spelled out in media texts—the journalists (can) instead concentrate on commenting on specific elements of the cases at hand (Kuronen, Tienari, & Vaara, 2001).

The second central rationalistic argument was that the Norwegian State was not an appropriate owner for a financial services institution such as CBK. The following example is from Norway: “The financial world is changing so fast and dynamically that politicians cannot usually keep up with the pace” (*Dagbladet*, May 24, 2000). In Swedish and Finnish media texts, the Norwegian government was criticized for being inefficient and slow in making decisions concerning the future of CBK. State ownership was considered old-fashioned and detrimental to the development of the Norwegian banking sector in general, as a Finnish example illustrates: “For the past two years, economists and bankers have foreseen and known that before long, the Norwegian banking sector must also be made more competitive. Yet politicians have not done anything about it” (*Kauppalehti*, November 3, 1999). The message seems to be that economists and bankers know better—and the process of privatization is inevitable.

The third major argument within the rationalistic discursive framework was synergies. In the context of MNB’s offer, this was often referred to as strategic fit. MNB was, in this sense, portrayed as a “perfect” solution for CBK: “The industrially right and financially fair choice” (*Dagens Naeringsliv*, February 29, 2000). MNB’s strategy of creating a Nordic bank group was often mentioned in this context. The acquisition would also benefit CBK, as it could now exploit the other bank’s competences and have better access to capital. Synergies of the equivalent of approximately U.S.\$100 million generated by the acquisition—estimated by some analysts—were not questioned in any depth in the media.

In all, a large part of the press coverage in Norway, Sweden, and Finland on the CBK acquisition concentrated on financial and managerial issues, especially on performance evaluation. The growth of the Nordic bank constellation and its strong performance indicators also led analysts (and journalists) to speculate on its future. The acquisition of CBK appeared as a link in a chain of events: past, present, and anticipated. There were speculations about the new bank being of interest in the near future to some of the large continental European banks—for example, German or Dutch—as a convenient way to expand to the Nordic market. *Helsingin Sanomat* (largest daily newspaper in Finland) titled an article on October 17, 2000, “The Table Is Laid, Deutsche Bank.”

### **Nationalistic Discourse**

Norwegian national sentiment was frequently discussed in the context of MNB's acquisition of CBK. Press coverage in Norway, Sweden, and Finland was built on elements of what we call a nationalistic discourse, albeit in somewhat different forms in the three countries.<sup>1</sup> In Norway, most of the nationalistic reflections referred—explicitly or implicitly—to national interests without specifying clearly what was meant by such interests. However, in some cases, the texts referred to the risks associated with increasing foreign ownership and control. *Dagbladet* (2000), a Norwegian daily newspaper, speculated that “Norway is in danger of becoming a subsidiary district in Europe's periphery” (*Dagbladet*, November 20, 2000). In general, the discussion was about maintaining decisionmaking power in domestic hands.

The Norwegian tabloid *Verdens Gang* (1999) said on December 27 that “if the government prevents the acquisition, there will again be talk of Norwegian nationalism” (*Verdens Gang*, December 27, 1999). The word *again* is significant here. In part, such concerns relate to the earlier negotiated merger agreement between the State-owned telecommunications companies Telia (Sweden) and Telenor (Norway). This merger was cancelled in December 1999, in part, because of disputes concerning the location of the headquarters of the most prestigious divisions of the new company (cf. Meyer, 2001b). The Swedish media, in particular, seemed to have been active in complaining about Norwegian nationalist sentiments being a major reason for this outcome.

Sweden was, indeed, a central reference in the nationalistic texts on CBK in Norway. It is important to note that many of the texts in the Norwegian media presented MNB as a Swedish bank: for example, “A Swedish bank wants to buy Kreditkassen” (*Verdens Gang*, September 20, 1999). Consequently, the acquisition was, at times, reconstructed as a battle between Norwegians and Swedes. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from a Norwegian daily newspaper:

Yesterday we became world champions in [ladies] handball. When the Minister of Transport, Dag Jostein Fjærvoll, goes to Stockholm today, will he—on behalf of the Bondevik government and Norwegian patriotism—be able to beat the Swedes in an increasingly difficult merger war? And it will not be the first time the Norwegians and Swedish are at war against each other. (*Dagbladet*, December 13, 1999)

Note the “we” that frames the message in the text (cf. Billig, 1995).

The historical relationship between Sweden and Norway was then mentioned explicitly: “Dagbladet has reviewed the wars between Norway and Sweden. Who will finally win the match between little brother Norway and big brother Sweden?” (*Dagbladet*, December 13, 1999). This asymmetrical relationship—the match—appeared to characterize a large part of the reflections on the CBK case in the Norwegian press. Against this background, it is not surprising to note that the more the acquisition was portrayed as a conflict between Norway and Sweden, the more evidence of questioning and criticism toward foreign ownership could be found in the Norwegian media texts.

Although CBK was typically portrayed in Swedish and Finnish media texts as an ideal acquisition target for MNB, there were also speculations about Norwegian nationalism. In the context of the prolonged acquisition, Norwegians were often depicted as indecisive, difficult, patriotic, and suspicious of foreigners in general. *Dagens Industri*, the major Swedish daily business newspaper, called attention to the bearish trend in stock prices on the Oslo Stock Exchange:

This autumn’s game around Kreditkassen . . . clearly demonstrates the Norwegian politicians’ lack of market acumen. This is particularly problematic in Norway, because there the State is a synonym for capital to a higher degree than in any other industrialized country. Hence, the reasons for the slow development of the Oslo Stock Exchange lie much deeper than in the political confusion of the last few months. (November 13, 1999)

In the Swedish texts, concern was also raised about how the “Norwegian attitude” would make postacquisition integration a difficult task and prevent rational decisions in the new bank constellation.

In Finland, when MNB made its first offer for the CBK, *Kauppalehti*, the major daily business newspaper, concentrated on introducing to its readers the “strange” financial world of Norway. Several articles depicted Norwegians as negative toward foreign ownership of Norwegian financial institutions. This was compared with the Finns and the Swedes. This attitude was explained by the fact that Norway stayed outside the European Union and, therefore, valued national ownership highly: “Although the significance of domestic ownership is decreasing elsewhere, it might still be a strong value in Norway, as the country has stayed out of the EU and the Euro zone,” (*Kauppalehti*, November 21, 1999). Many of

the Finnish texts even ridiculed—from a rationalistic perspective— Norwegian nationalism. In this context, it is ironic to note that the Finnish media coverage on the merger between Merita (Finland) and Nordbanken (Sweden) in 1997 was characterized by a very similar kind of blatant nationalism (cf. Risberg et al., 2003).

### **Making Use of Discursive Strategies and Resources**

In the following, we illustrate the ways in which particular actors make use of discursive strategies and resources in attempting to legitimize their positions and to pursue their ends in the context of CBK acquisition. Table 1 summarizes key actors and their discursive strategies.

*Merita-Nordbanken (MNB)*. Representatives of MNB, the acquirer, notably drew on and mobilized rationalistic discourse in justifying their series of offers for CBK. At the time of the merger between Merita and Nordbanken in October 1997, the top managers already made public their intentions of attracting more merger and acquisition partners from the Nordic countries to MNB in the near future. In line with this strategy, an offer for CBK seemed a logical step. By acquiring CBK, MNB’s objective was to secure rapid growth and market share in Norway and to become the largest bank in the Nordic countries. In their comments in public, representatives of MNB worked to avoid the image of a hostile takeover. The following example is from the leading Norwegian daily business newspaper: “CEO Hans Dalborg of Merita-Nordbanken attempted to charm the shareholders of Kreditkassen. A good return on investment and better customer service will encourage shareholders to sell their shares to the Swedish-Finnish bank” (*Dagens Naeringsliv*, October 11, 1999).

Table 1  
*The Discursive Strategies of Key Actors in Media Texts*

<i>Position of Actor</i>	<i>Discursive Strategies</i>
In favor of the MNB acquisition	
Representatives of Merita-Nordbanken (MNB)	Rationalistic; selective use of nationalist sentiments in arguing for “Nordic”
Representatives of Christiania Bank og Kreditkasse (CBK)	Rationalistic and societal (employment concerns); selective use of nationalist sentiments
“Experts”	Rationalistic (rendering nationalistic argumentation illegitimate)
Against the MNB acquisition	
Representatives of Den norske Bank (DnB)	Nationalistic and (ex post) rationalistic
Representatives of Handelsbanken	Rationalistic (shifting content ex ante and ex post)
Ambiguous	
Right-wing minority government in Norway	Nationalistic/rationalistic (balance shifting)
Norwegian Labour Party	Nationalistic shifting to broadened and rationalized “national solution”

It also seems that representatives of MNB attempted to appeal to Norwegian nationalist sentiments. CEO Hans Dalborg welcomed the State of Norway as a shareholder in the new bank group but made explicit his preference for private Norwegian shareholders:

Dalborg still signalled that he would not prefer the Norwegian State as a shareholder of the Swedish- Finnish bank. "Ownership based on strong representation of Norwegian private shareholders is more exciting than strong State ownership," Dalborg argues, but adds that it is not the management's task to decide who can own the company. (*Dagens Naeringsliv*, October 11, 1999)

Furthermore, part of MNB's discursive strategy seemed to have been to ensure the Norwegian public that acquiring CBK would not lead to staff dismissals in Norway in the near future, in contrast to expectations in the case of a domestic Norwegian merger or acquisition. References to a clear-cut Norwegian bank within the new Nordic bank constellation were already made in accordance with MNB's first offer in September 1999: "Several 'interesting' things in the Swedish-Finnish bank's offer: Kreditkassen keeps its name and remains an independent bank in Norway" (*Verdens Gang*, September 21, 1999).

By emphasizing both shareholders' interests ("A good return on investments and better customer service"; "It is not the management's task to decide who can own the company") and Norwegian interests more generally ("remains an independent bank in Norway"), the management of MNB can be interpreted to have mobilized rationalistic and nationalistic discourse in arguing for their claims and purposes. It may also be speculated that rationalistic argumentation was targeted at decision makers in business (globally and locally) and potential Norwegian private shareholders, whereas nationalistic argumentation was targeted at politicians and bank customers in Norway.

In *Dagens Industri*, the major Swedish daily business newspaper, CEO Hans Dalborg underlined MNB's consistent strategy and referred to the success in conveying this message to the Norwegian public: "Merita-Nordbanken's strategic motive to create a Nordic bank group which includes CBK is unchanged and strong and it has gained wide acceptance in Norway" (December 4, 1999). After the merger between MNB and the Danish Unidanmark in March 2000, the Swedish-Finnish-Danish constellation profiled itself as an even more attractive acquirer for CBK. The MNB strategists were a step closer to a Nordic bank.

*Christiania Bank og Kreditkasse (CBK)*. Representatives of CBK, the acquisition target, supported MNB's offer from the beginning. The CEO of CBK, Tom Ruud, mobilized rationalistic discourse in the media in stressing the strategic fit between the banks, and the compatibility between the visions of the managements of the potential acquirer and the acquired: "A very good solution. A good industrial model. . . . These plans match the strategic ideas of [CBK's] management very well" (*Verdens Gang*, September 20, 1999). Ruud made it clear that if CBK remained "a profitable regional [Norwegian] bank" it would need "fewer employees" and "risk losing the best employees" (*Verdens Gang*, September 21, 1999). Representatives of the employees of the bank, in turn, also stressed the employment aspects of accepting MNB as the acquirer. This is exemplified in *Verdens Gang*, the Norwegian tabloid, in response to MNB's initial offer: "The employees feel positive because Merita Nordbanken has no plans for layoffs—whereas several will lose their jobs if Kassa [i.e., CBK] continues to operate in the current way" (September 21, 1999).

A more societal discourse on employment effects (Vaara & Tienari, 2002), then, was mobilized to argue in favor of MNB's offer. The ramifications of the various competing solutions were brought out into the open. The management of CBK drew on and mobilized the employment argument. In addition to convincing politicians of the economic advantages of the acquisition, societal and nationalistic arguments were used. It seemed that Tom Ruud, the CEO, became entangled in nationalistic discourse in ways that were, at times, beyond his control. The largest Finnish daily newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, quoted Ruud: "The management of Kreditkassen regards a Nordic solution as good for the industry, the customers and the employees. According to Ruud, the only clearly negative issue is that the headquarters of the bank would not be located in Oslo" (November 29, 1999). The reference to Nordic is significant. In contrast to presenting MNB as a Swedish company (which, as pointed out earlier, may be interpreted as a handicap in the present context), the management of CBK emphasized the Nordic nature of the favored acquirer. Yet the diminishing weight of Oslo, the capital city of Norway, was regrettable in this solution from a nationalistic perspective.

Tom Ruud eventually gained an ambiguous image in the Norwegian media. After MNB received permission to acquire CBK, an article in *Dagbladet*, a major Norwegian daily newspaper, portrayed Ruud personally in a somewhat unfavorable light. He was labelled "the man who sold Kreditkassen," an institution established in 1848 (October 17,

2000). The personal benefits received by Ruud were highlighted; attention was paid to his senior position in the new bank and to his personal financial gains as a result of an increase in CBK's stock price. Ruud was then put in the public role of scapegoat in contrast to his earlier role as hero.

*Den norske Bank (DnB)*. As MNB offered to acquire CBK, the management of DnB, the largest Norwegian bank, faced the potential threat of increasing competition in its domestic market. In addition, DnB had some time earlier made explicit their willingness to take over CBK. Against this background, it is not surprising that the aim of DnB's discursive strategy was to prevent MNB's maneuver and to foster support for a domestic Norwegian solution in industrial restructuring. Top managers in DnB drew from nationalistic and rationalistic discourses when looking after their interests. They worked to convince Norwegian politicians, in particular, of the flaws in MNB's offers for CBK. The CEO of DnB, Svein Aaser, was interviewed by *Verdens Gang*, the Norwegian tabloid:

The management in Den norske Bank hope that the State will issue a report on the structure of the Norwegian financial sector before making a decision concerning the sale of Kreditkassen to the Finnish-Swedish Merita Nordbanken. The management advises the State not to sell the bank for silver coins. . . . "An offer of silver coins," he [Aaser] says and stresses that the offer of 44 crowns per share is far too low. He did not reject the possibility of a merger between DnB and Kreditkassen, which he believes would have a lot of positive consequences. "Besides, it is not right that Stockholm shall become our financial capital." (October 5, 1999)

CEO Svein Aaser of DnB drew on rationalistic discourse to state that the fate of CBK must be based on a financially justified selling price. He did so, however, with an interesting choice of words. The expression "silver coins" refers to the betrayal of Christ by Judas. With this metaphor, Aaser clearly attempted to make MNB's offer for CBK sound morally questionable. Argumentation mobilizing nationalist discourse is explicit here. In stating that "it is not right that Stockholm shall become our financial capital," Aaser clearly drew on Norwegian nationalist sentiments. Specifically, he equated MNB with Stockholm (Sweden) and placed Stockholm outside the boundaries of "us," a collective that he and the readers of *Verdens Gang* shared (cf., Billig, 1995).

Representatives of DnB also made statements downplaying the increase in competition MNB would bring to the Norwegian financial services market. A comment by the deputy CEO of DnB was referred to in *Dagens Naeringsliv*, the Norwegian business daily: “He does not see the possible merger between Merita and Kreditkassen as a threat to DnB in the Norwegian market” (December 7, 1999). Despite such statements, the management of DnB apparently felt threatened. In February 2000, DnB increased its ownership in CBK to 9.98%:

Den norske Bank now owns 9.98 percent of the total share capital in Christiania Bank og Kreditkasse after it acquired another 8.49 percent of Kreditkassen’s shares. Chairman Jannik Lindbæk of DnB Holding ASA says that DnB took this position in order to look after its interests in the best possible way in the restructuring of the Norwegian and Nordic financial sector. (*Verdens Gang*, February 28, 2000)

It must be born in mind that according to Norwegian legislation, shareholders with 90% of the votes in the financial institution had to support the foreign acquirer before the acquisition could be accepted. For DnB, the stake in CBK was a strategic position. It eventually proved to be profitable as MNB was forced to raise its offers for CBK. “Originally, DnB hoped to merge with Kreditkassen, but the Parliament was against it. As compensation, the bank can now be happy with a profit of 200 million NKR by selling its shares in Kreditkassen” (*Dagens Naeringsliv*, October 16, 2000). It seems that although the nationalistic discourse mobilized by the top managers in DnB was not sufficient in this context to prevent MNB from acquiring CBK, rationalistic discourse provided the actors with an opportunity for what appears as ex-post rationalization.

*Handelsbanken.* Representatives of Handelsbanken, a major Swedish bank, sought to prevent MNB, one of its toughest competitors, from obtaining a strong and firm foothold in Norway, and becoming the largest bank in the Nordic region. On June 3, 1999, Handelsbanken had acquired Bergensbanken, a mid-sized Norwegian bank with a regional base on the West Coast. Hence, the top management in Handelsbanken were also seeking to strengthen their position in the Norwegian market. As the top management and employees in CBK had made clear their preference for MNB early on, it seems that part of the discursive strategy of Handelsbanken was to raise the selling price for CBK and thus to play for time. Handelsbanken’s image of a distinctly Swedish bank was problematic in Norway.

Arne Mårtensson, the CEO of Handelsbanken, commented on MNB's first offer for CBK in oracle-like fashion. The following extract is again from *Verdens Gang*, the largest Norwegian tabloid:

Handelsbanken wants to acquire either Kreditkassen or DnB. But first, the Group CEO Arne Mårtensson wants a blessing from the Norwegian parliament. According to *Dagens Næringsliv*, in case politicians decide that Kreditkassen can be sold, Mårtensson will make a higher offer than Merita-Nordbanken or he will make an offer for DnB. He thinks Kreditkassen is worth more than Merita-Nordbanken's offer of 44 crowns per share, but refuses to say how high he values Kreditkassen. (October 1, 1999)

In general, Mårtensson's statements drew on rational, financial, and economic considerations. He kept another option (buying DnB) open and, in so doing, also implicitly conveyed the message of Handelsbanken's size and resources for making strategic moves in the Nordic financial services sector. In spring 2000, Handelsbanken finally did make a competing offer for CBK. This offer was based on an exchange of shares.

After the Norwegian authorities' decision to accept MNB's offer for CBK, CEO Arne Mårtensson of Handelsbanken drew on rationalistic discourse to argue that judged by financial criteria, the price had now become too high. The following text appeared in *Aftonbladet*, a major Swedish tabloid (i.e., Handelsbanken's own "home ground"), under the title "Handelsbanken: The Price Was Too High": "Arne Mårtensson denies any disappointment after losing in the bid and says that Merita-Nordbanken had to pay a high price. 'It was a question of money. We had decided how high we could go and when the offer exceeded that limit there was not much to discuss,' he says" (October 16, 2000).

It is interesting to note that Handelsbanken's offer for CBK was actually higher in numerical terms than MNB's. Handelsbanken's offer was, as mentioned previously, based on a transfer of shares whereas MNB's was in cash. MNB's offer was thereby more attractive to Norwegian politicians as the key question on the agenda was whether to diminish State ownership in financial institutions or to continue "business as usual."

*“Experts”*. It is evident that financial analysts as “experts” played a visible role in molding public discussion on CBK. This was the case in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Although not a coherent, monolithic discourse actor, we consider experts in the following as a collective whose main considerations in the present context were twofold. First, it was about making money. “According to several bank analysts, Merita- Nordbanken’s offer on Kreditkassen is too low” (*Verdens Gang*, September 21, 1999). Second, it was about pursuing an ideological agenda whereby problems related to State ownership in financial institutions are solved. Experts pointed to the trend on the Oslo Stock Exchange as proof of the negative influence of State ownership on the Norwegian economy. This is illustrated in the comments by Jan Eiler Fleischer, head of Gambak Fondsforvaltning, a major seller of funds in Norway, in *Dagens Industri*, the major Swedish daily business newspaper: “The world economy is doing well, the price of oil has gone up, and the interest rates have fallen. Yet the Oslo Exchange goes nowhere. The reason for the poor showing is the government” (November 18, 1999).

Experts argued that if CBK was to remain competitive, the bank would have to have more private (Norwegian) owners and reduce the State’s share. Experts in Sweden, in particular, also raised concern about how the Norwegian attitude would make the postmerger integration in MNB a difficult task, preventing rational decisions. In an example from the Swedish *Dagens Industri*, next, noted the direct reference to the aborted merger between Telia (Sweden) and Telenor (Norway):

The experts with which DI has been in contact argue that the bank will have a hard job in merging the banks into one. . . . Another analyst warns that national and political prestige will make the integration more difficult. “Just as in the Telia-Telenor case, it will be difficult for the bank to make market-based optimal decisions. Norwegians are not known for their nationalism without reason. Nationalism will probably be a more important issue than competence when the managers are appointed.” (October 17, 2000)

In all, it seems that in the discursive strategies of experts, nationalistic considerations are subordinated to rationalistic argumentation. It can even be said that experts clearly treat nationalism as illegitimate in the contemporary world of business. They treat the market as an abstract, global entity that needs to be trimmed for efficiency.

*Centre-right minority government.* The government led by prime minister Kjell-Magne Bondevik, consisting of the Christian Democrats, the Centre Party, and the Liberals, was in power in Norway until March 2000. This government was initially in a key position to consider MNB's offer for CBK. The centre-right government first appealed to the Norwegian parliament's earlier decision to secure Norwegian State ownership in financial institutions and rejected the initial offer. As a result, the official position of the government seemed to have been against selling CBK to MNB. The Minister of Finance Gudmund Restad was said to favor "strong banks with headquarters in Norway" (*Verdens Gang*, September 20, 1999). A spokesperson for the Centre Party stated: "National ownership is very important to the Centre Party" (*Verdens Gang*, September 21, 1999). The Bondevik government seemed to have remained, however, relatively ambivalent vis-à-vis the CBK case.<sup>2</sup>

According to Norwegian legislation, an individual stakeholder may own up to 10% of a Norwegian financial institution; if it acquires more it has to make an offer to buy out all the other shareholders. In late October 1999, the centre-right government made a proposition to the parliament to raise this ownership ceiling to 25%: "The government has a long term goal of securing Norwegian ownership in banks. There is thus no immediate need to sell either Kreditkassen or DnB, says Minister of Finance, Gudmund Restad. At the same time Restad is relaxing restrictions over share ownership somewhat" (*Dagbladet*, October 29, 1999). Despite initially rejecting MNB's offer, the Bondevik government later shifted their general policy on foreign ownership. On November 26, 1999, the government and the Labour Party (in opposition) were reported to have reached an agreement whereby State ownership would be concentrated in a single financial institution: "The market believes that this means that the State will retain its ownership in the largest bank, Den norske Bank, and could thereby sell Christiania" (*Helsingin Sanomat*, November 29, 1999).

After the resignation of Kjell-Magne Bondevik's government in March 2000, the Christian Democrat Party seemed to have adopted a stand according to which it was possible to sell CBK to a foreign acquirer on the condition that the Norwegian State would retain significant ownership in the new bank group. Once again, note the reference to Nordic (in contrast to Swedish): "Kjell Magne Bondevik and Valgerd Svarstad Haugland say yes to selling the 150-year-old bank outside Norway. But Bondevik & Co. set a condition; they insist that the State of Norway acquire a significant interest in the new Nordic bank" (*Verdens Gang*, May 19, 2000).

It is important to note that Kjell-Magne Bondevik's Christian Democrat Party is a distinctly right-wing party. Nationalism should thus not be treated as a discourse, the mobilization of which follows traditional 388 JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT INQUIRY / December 2003 political divides. The center-right political actors in Norway constantly drew on nationalistic discourse in the CBK case. They seem to have done so, however, with different emphasis at different times. After their move to the opposition in March 2000, the meaning of "Norwegian interests" seems to have shifted somewhat for them. It no longer categorically implied refusing to sell CBK to MNB. Rather, a significant stake by the State of Norway in the new bank was now deemed enough.

*The Labour Party.* Representatives of the largest parliamentary party in Norway, the left-wing (social democratic) Labour Party, played perhaps the key role in the CBK case. The Labour Party was in opposition until March 2000 when it formed a new minority government led by Jens Stoltenberg. The party had been active in forming the Norwegian parliament's earlier decision on State ownership in financial institutions, and in the autumn of 1999, the party seemed to have been reluctant to form a clear and final opinion on MNB's offer. Labour Party spokespersons—often Torbjörn Jagland, the party chairman—set guidelines and conditions for other Norwegian political actors:

The Labour Party refuses to sell the State's share in Kreditkassen before Merita-Nordbanken's offer expires on December 3rd. The Party hopes to devise a national solution that could handle all the State's investments in the banking and financial sector. . . . "Until we have such a solution, all possible plans to sell the State's shares in banks and financial institutions will be put on ice," Labour Party chairman Thorbjorn Jagland said. (*Verdens Gang*, October 1, 1999)

Nationalistic discourse is exemplified by the reference to a national solution. This discourse was clearly in evidence in the statements of top Labour politicians in opposition. The following examples are from *Verdens Gang*, the Norwegian tabloid: "It is necessary to find a banking structure that has a national base, Labour Party chairman Thorbjorn Jagland said" (October 5, 1999); and "Selling Kreditkassen to Swedes is considered by Thorbjorn Jagland and the Labour Party. Aprerequisite is that the State acquire a controlling share in Merita-

Nordbanken” (October 23, 1999). Note the reference to Swedes made by the journalist when discussing the Swedish-Finnish MNB’s offer.

Hence, in the autumn of 1999, the Labour Party seemed to have settled for a solution in which the State of Norway secured a stake in the new bank group (including CBK as the Norwegian leg): “Bjørnar Olsen, member of the central committee of the Labour Party, said that he wishes the State would sell its shares in Kreditkassen and buy [shares] in the bank group that Kreditkassen will join” (*Dagens Naeringsliv*, November 5, 1999). After their return to government in March 2000, top Labour politicians eventually decided to concentrate Norwegian State ownership in one financial institution, DnB. Again, note the reference to Swedes as the out group in this context: “The Labour Party’s politicians in charge of financial issues will sell Kreditkassen to Swedes. . . . At the same time, they want to develop DnB [Den norske Bank] into a strong Norwegian financial unit” (*Verdens Gang*, March 21, 2000).

For the Labour Party, as for the center-right block, the national Norwegian solution seems to have acquired different meanings at different times. Although the Labour Party’s initial position was built on the demand that the Norwegian State would become a major owner in the bank that was to acquire CBK, this position shifted to securing the Norwegian base of DnB. The Labour Party agreed to sell CBK to the highest bidder (as was predicted by experts in the autumn of 1999).

Tracing the discursive strategies of the representatives of the Labour Party revealed a more refined concept of nationalistic discourse. The extent to which the nation is equated with state is one of the classical questions in studying nationalism(cf. Anderson, 1983). It would seem that for the Norwegian Labour Party, a left-wing party in the social democratic tradition, state would be the overriding reference point here rather than nation. Demands such as “that the State acquire a controlling share” (*Verdens Gang*, November 15, 1999) indeed hinted in this direction. When in power, the Labour Party’s emphasis seemed to have turned to attracting competing offers for CBK, and thereby to raising its price. This, in part, helps to make sense of the lag between the principle decision to sell CBK in March 2000 and the actual completion of the deal in October 2000. When the deal was closed, a top Labour politician declared: “The present acquisition is in line with prerequisites laid down by the parliament and the government. Selling [CBK] to MeritaNordbanken forms a Nordic banking solution. It gives Kreditkassen interesting opportunities for development, says the Minister of Finance, Karl Eirik Schjøtt- Pedersen” (*Dagens Naeringsliv*, October 16, 2000).

Rationalistic discourse was mobilized to justify the deal. “A Nordic banking solution” which serves (broader) Norwegian national interests, was constructed discursively. This seems to have provided the Labour Party with an honorable way out of the delicate situation, which began as a search for a national solution in the financial services sector. As a discourse actor, the Labour Party was eventually able to construct an acceptable national Norwegian solution with a rationalistic basis: a strong Norwegian institution (DnB) and selling CBK to foreigners for a market price.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article, we examined in detail an instance of international industrial restructuring, a prolonged process of a cross-border acquisition. Contributing to the emerging management and organizations literature on the discursive elements of business events and strategies, we have analyzed texts in the popular and business press to make sense of the acquisition process and the diverse actors involved. Building on the notion that strategy is about language constructed to persuade others to accept certain understandings and take certain actions (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Dunford & Jones, 2000), the main contribution of our study lies in identifying how specific actors—as protagonists or antagonists—draw on and mobilize discourses in public discussion on business events (cf. Hardy et al., 2000).

In the introduction, we posed the question “How do actors make use of discursive strategies and resources in public discussion in pursuing and resisting international acquisitions?” Our media analysis indicates that actors’ discursive strategies depend on the position held in the constellation of actors. Constellations evolve in time, and strategizing purely on the basis of financial or economic rationale is thus insufficient. It may become necessary to, on one hand, pepper rationalistic arguments with nationalist sentiments or, on the other, to rationalize nationalistic arguments. Nationalism can serve as a vehicle for financial ends, but it can also be used to obstruct other actors’ strategies. Although analyses of discursive strategizing are necessarily context specific, we suggest that these basic points are generalizable across international acquisitions.

Our study demonstrates the dominance of rationalistic discourse in the media. Within this discourse, international (cross-border) acquisitions are constructed as taken-for-granted, inevitable elements of global industrial restructuring (Vaara & Tienari, 2002). It is evident that this dominant discourse works through specific themes such as corporate growth,

competitiveness, and efficiency. It gives voice to top executives to convince their audience of the justification and legitimacy of their actions. In the context studied, rationalistic discourse was mobilized especially by those arguing for the focal cross-border acquisition, but it also enabled ex-post rationalization by those against (e.g., the losing bidder in an acquisition) or those whose viewpoint shifted in time (e.g., political actors).

Rationalistic discourse clearly reflects a modernist or positivist worldview in that the arguments of various actors usually refer to strategies, plans, analyses, or calculations when justifying particular viewpoints. Media texts exhibiting this discourse often presented such calculations as factual future projections. Calculations seem to have been rarely contested in the media (although it could be argued that they are typically based on crude evaluations of economic development and only tentative ideas about, for example, cost savings). One explanation for the lack of critical scrutiny is that international acquisitions are characterized by information asymmetry; the top corporate decision makers of the acquiring companies are gatekeepers for much of the information that others would need to challenge their views. In all, it can be argued that rationalistic discourse makes—or forces—the logic of the contemporary neo-liberal global economy factual (Bourdieu, 1998; Fairclough, 2000).

Our analysis also illustrates how nationalistic discourse can challenge the rationale of international industrial restructuring. In contrast to the rationalistic discourse, the rhetoric of the nationalistic discourse is often emotional, appealing to taken-for-granted, although often ambiguous, collective national sentiments (Billig, 1995; De Cillia et al., 1999). In the context studied, nationalistic discourse was mobilized particularly by those corporate actors who were against the focal cross-border acquisition (to reach their own financial ends) and by political actors whose viewpoints remained ambiguous.

Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of the emerging nationalistic discourse also reveals specificities in nationalism in the different countries involved. These specificities can be made sense of through the particular historical constellation of cross-national relations in the context (see note 1). Nationalistic discourse is built on relationship-specific social identification. It can become a vehicle for challenging (or even resisting) the forces of global capitalism. In the end, however, it seems to be difficult to overcome the forces driving toward international industrial restructuring legitimated by the dominant rationalistic discourse, especially when this discourse is skillfully seasoned with nationalist sentiment.

As to actors' discursive strategies, our analysis shows that the same actors can draw on different— even contradictory—discourses at different times. In addition, different actors—even with opposing objectives— may draw on the same discourse in legitimizing their positions and pursuing specific ends. In the complex emerging public discussion around business maneuvers, such as international acquisitions, we can thus observe discursive moves by the actors that appear hypocritical, especially when examined retrospectively (cf. Brunsson, 1989). This hypocrisy is not, however, always intentional in the sense that actors would consciously argue something that they would not believe in or intend to pursue. Rather, hypocrisy can be understood as an unintended consequence of discursive strategizing in the media where one has limited ability to control the messages published in different outlets.

Our findings suggest avenues for future research. The ability of individual actors to juggle with discursive resources over time needs to be studied further. This is also related to the differing profiles of media outlets. In our study, traces of rationalistic and nationalistic discourses could be found in the popular and business press; although, in general, it seems that tabloids are particularly eager to build on nationalism. The ways in which corporate executives can handle this variation is a fruitful research topic. Moreover, it is clear that efforts at increasing legitimacy are not always successful. As pointed out by Ashforth and Gibbs (1991), legitimization efforts may be double-edged swords as the constituencies at which the efforts are directed may perceive actors to be manipulative and illegitimate, precisely the opposite of what they (explicitly or implicitly) aim to be. Additional research is needed on the dynamics involved in the production of legitimacy through different discourses in the media. Interpretations of constituencies, such as employees, may be particularly interesting here.

In general, our analysis points to the importance of attempting to make sense of how discourses and the balances between them change in time. It would make intuitive sense to claim that Zeitgeists inform changes in the ways in which business is discussed in public. A study of U.S. media coverage of business events and strategies before and after the scandals in Enron and elsewhere were revealed, for example, would provide a fruitful basis for this. In addition, a more finegrained examination of nationalistic discourse in different cross-organizational contexts is called for. Analyzing the role and influence of political actors from this perspective would be particularly useful. It seems that the intersection of business and politics remains an underresearched area in management and organizations literature.

## NOTES

1. An in-depth analysis of the emerging nationalistic discourse in the CBK case reveals specificities in the nationalism of the three countries involved. These specificities can be made sense of through the particular, historical constellation of cross-national relations in the context. Norway, Sweden, and Finland are neighboring countries in the northeastern corner of Europe. The Kingdom of Sweden is very much the central reference point here. In 1814, Norway formed a “personal union” with Sweden, which meant that the King of Sweden became head of state in Norway. The growing national movement led to a declaration of independence; Norway became an independent Kingdom in 1905. Finland, too, has been part of the Kingdom of Sweden, from 1323 until 1809. From 1809 to 1917, Finland was a Grand Duchy in Imperial Russia. In 1917, Finland declared its independence and became a Republic. In terms of more recent history, it is useful to note that Sweden and Finland became full members of the European Union at the beginning of 1995. In both countries, the decision to join was based on the result of a referendum held in autumn 1994. In contrast to its neighbors, Norway decided to stay outside the EU after a similar referendum.

2. As key political actors, we focus on the center-right minority government in power in Norway until March 2000 and the Labour Party in power after March 2000. Three of the main Norwegian parties that were in opposition for the entire period were the Conservative Party, the Extreme Right (Fremskrittspartiet), and the Socialist Party. From the very beginning, the Conservatives took a positive stance toward MNB’s offer for CBK as it would reduce State involvement in Norwegian business. The Socialist Party was sharply against MNB’s offer. Other significant Norwegian actors included the representatives of the Norwegian Bank Investment Fund, which was in charge of the shares owned by the State in Kreditkassen. They explicitly opposed MNB’s initial offer.

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