A REPUTATIONAL THEORY OF CORPORATE LAW

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How does corporate law matter? This Article provides a new perspective on the long-standing question by suggesting that the main impact of corporate law is not in imposing sanctions, but rather in producing information. The process of litigation or regulatory investigations produces information on the behavior of defendant companies and businessmen. This information reaches third parties, and affects the way that outside observers treat the parties to the dispute. In other words, litigation affects behavior indirectly, through shaping reputational sanctions. The Article then explores how exactly information from the courtroom translates into the court of public opinion. By analyzing the content of media coverage of famous corporate law cases we gain two sets of insights. First, we learn that judicial scolding does not necessarily hurt the misbehaving company’s reputation. The reputational impact of litigation depends on factors such as who the judge is scolding, what she is scolding them for, and how her scolding compares to the preexisting information environment. Second, we flesh out the ways in which information flows from the courtroom get distorted. Information intermediaries selectively disseminate certain pieces of information and ignore others. And the defendant companies produce smokescreens in an attempt to divert the public’s attention. Recognizing that corporate law affects behavior by facilitating reputational sanctions carries important policy implications. The Article reevaluates key doctrines in corporate and securities laws according to how they contribute to information production. In the process we refocus timely and practical debates such as the desirability of open-ended standards and liberal pleading mechanisms, and the proper scope of judicial review of the Securities and Exchange Commission’s actions.

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INTRODUCTION

How does corporate law work? This question has puzzled academics for decades. The puzzle stems from the fact that the managers and directors who are supposed to be disciplined by corporate law almost never pay out of pocket for their misbehaviors.¹ In other words, corporate law lacks sanctions. Without sanctions, where does deterrence come from? The corporate governance literature has suggested in response that deterrence comes not from the law or direct financial sanctions, but rather from indirect reputational sanctions. Managers do their best not because they fear direct sanctions, but rather because they wish to protect their long-term reputation in the labor market or among their peers.² But such an answer only generates a second puzzle: how do indirect, reputational sanctions work?³

This Article provides a new perspective on these puzzles by arguing that

¹ See Margaret Blair & Lynn Stout, Trust, Trustworthiness, and the Behavioral Foundations of Corporate Law, 149 U. Pa. L. Rev. 1735, 1791 (2001) (directors are more likely to get struck by lightning than pay damages for breaching their fiduciary duties); Bernard S. Black et al., Outside Director Liability, 58 Stan. L. Rev. 1055 (2006) (in a span of 25 years only 3 outside directors paid out of pocket).


³ Id. (“If the principal sanction is not directly financial but reputational, then one must explain how this sanction works, an account entirely absent from the standard account”).
corporate law affects behavior indirectly, through shaping reputational sanctions. In the process of litigation or regulatory investigations the legal system produces information on the behavior of the parties to the dispute. This information reaches third parties, and affects the way that outside observers treat parties to the dispute (regardless and beyond the effects of direct legal outcomes). In other words, information from litigation and investigations shape the market reaction to misbehavior.

The way to solve the above-mentioned puzzles is therefore to marry them: look at law and reputation together, as complementing each other. The corporate governance literature has rested on the assumption that reputation matters, but has remained remarkably silent on how exactly reputation matters. What explains the variation in reputational sanctions? Why do some companies and businessmen emerge from failure unscathed, while others go bankrupt? Some of the answers, this Article claims, can be found in the information-production function of the law. The law serves as an important channel that affects the reputation of companies and businessmen. Reputation therefore matters through corporate law. And corporate law matters through reputation.

Realizing that corporate law affects behavior by facilitating reputational sanctions carries important policy implications. If corporate litigation does indeed generate a positive externality in the form of helping market players get better information, then key doctrines and institutions should be reevaluated according to how they contribute to information production. This Article offers alternative explanations to much-debated features of Delaware corporate law, such as the increased reliance on open-ended standards or the liberal use of pleading mechanisms. The Article also sheds light on previously overlooked dilemmas, such as whether to assess director liability individually or collectively, or how to approve settlements in derivative and class actions.

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4 In recent years this assumption has received empirical support. For an overview see Jonathan M. Karpoff, Does Reputation Work to Discipline Corporate Misconduct?, in The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Reputation (Barnett & Pollock eds., 2012).
A few words on methodology are in order. The corporate governance literature deals extensively with “hard” market incentives such as executive compensation, but neglects “soft” market incentives such as maintaining a reputation for integrity. This is partly because analyzing reputational forces is challenging: they follow fuzzy dynamics and do not easily lend themselves to generalizations. My strategy in fleshing out these important yet understudied factors was to examine them from multiple angles and methodologies. I drew from the fast-emerging literature on reputation across disciplines (mainly economics and social psychology), gained insights from interviewing practitioners who work at the intersection between the court of law and the court of public opinion (mainly crisis management consultants and journalists), and corroborated my arguments with existing statistical data. Then, to make the arguments more concrete and applicable, I delved into specific case studies and conducted empirical content analyses of the media coverage of iconic corporate cases. I came up with several sets of insights, as detailed below.

Part I lays down the general theoretical framework. The Part generates two contributions: explaining why reputational assessments are inherently inaccurate, and fleshing out the ways in which the law affects their accuracy. When bad news about a company breaks and the company’s stakeholders consider whether to continue doing business with it in the future, they often lack the information or incentives to interpret the news correctly. As a result, the market overreacts to certain misbehaviors and underreacts to others. Stakeholders may stop doing business with perfectly fine companies or ignore warning signals and continue doing business with rotten companies. The market, when left alone, has trouble calibrating reputational sanctions correctly. But in reality the market is rarely left alone. Market players continuously look for information that is being produced by the legal system to help

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5 The following interviews proved especially insightful: Eric Dezenhall, head of a crisis management firm, Jul. 20, 2012; Charles Bakaly, head of the Litigation Communication Department of Edelman, Aug. 21, 2012; Richard Clary, former head of litigation in Cravath, Swaine & Moore, Nov. 16, 2012; Michael Fertik, founder of Reputation.com – a company offering online reputation management services, Feb. 11, 2013; Bruce Carton, former senior counsel with the SEC’s enforcement department, May 21, 2013; A representative of Courtroom Connect, a company who offers a service of live streaming coverage of litigation, June 13, 2013; Guy Rolnik, business journalist, Nov. 15, 2013. See references for additional interviews in footnotes 34, 77 and 168 infra.
them revise their initial reputational assessments. Reputational sanctions thus operate in the shadow of the law.

Part II applies the general framework to corporate fiduciary duty litigation in Delaware. I first refocus the debate over the effectiveness of corporate-law enforcement. When measuring enforcement we should look not just at the outcomes (legal sanctions) or content (moral rebukes offered in dicta) of judicial opinions, but also at earlier stages in the litigation process: pleading, discovery, and trial. The litigation process itself affects corporate behavior at least as much as judicial opinions do, through flushing out information and facilitating reputational sanctions. I then offer testable predictions on the reputational impact of litigation by outlining the factors that determine how information from the courtroom translates into reputational sanctions. One counterintuitive takeaway point is that judicial scolding does not necessarily hurt the misbehaving companies’ reputation. The reputational outcomes of litigation depend on questions such as who the judge is scolding (is she singling out an ousted individual or criticizing an unhealthy corporate culture?), what she is scolding them for (honest incompetence or calculated disregard of market norms?), and what her scolding adds to the already existing information environment.

Part III corroborates the theoretical arguments by delving into the famous Disney–Ovitz litigation as a case study. I analyze the content of media coverage of the Disney–Ovitz debacle before, during, and after litigation. By adopting such a methodology we gain two sets of insights that develop the reputational theory of the law. First, we learn about the relative reputational impact of each phase in litigation. For example, we learn that the verdict’s reputational impact is much more limited and favorable towards the defendant company than was previously assumed. Second, we learn about the distortions in information flows. A lot of information gets lost in transmission from the courtroom to the court of public opinion. Different

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6 The upshot is that even cases that settle produce reputational sanctions. For empirical support for this argument see footnote 34 infra and the accompanying text.

7 In re The Walt Disney Co. Derivative Litig., 907 A.2d 693 (Del. Ch. 2005) [hereinafter Disney].
information intermediaries, such as mass media or law firms, selectively choose
different pieces of information to convey to their respective audiences. And
defendant companies try to hijack the information flows by producing smokescreens
that divert the public’s attention.

Part IV sketches out the normative implications of the reputational theory of
corporate law. I reevaluate the desirability of key doctrines such as Zapata.\(^8\) I then
revisit the regulatory competition debate.\(^9\) The existing literature already recognized
that if Delaware wishes to remain the dominant state corporate law, it has to balance
between appeasing the public and Washington in order to prevent federal
intervention and appeasing corporate America in order to prevent corporate
migration. My reputational perspective adds the angle of how exactly Delaware
effectively balances this dual threat. By relying on scolding and not on direct
sanctioning, Delaware courts make it harder on the public and Washington to
decipher how tough the enforcement really is. Delaware courts can therefore use
judicial scolding as a low-visibility favoritism tool: allowing Delaware to appear
tougher on corporate America than it actually is.

Part V applies the theory to a different context by examining the reputational
impact of Securities and Exchange Commission’s (SEC) enforcement actions.
Switching from litigation to regulatory investigations allows us to not only enrich the
theory but also contribute to a practical and timely debate. The SEC enforcement
practices have recently faced mounting criticism following the Bank of America and
Citigroup cases,\(^10\) and became the center of national attention. I argue here that the
real problem with SEC settlements is not that the SEC leaves money on the table, but
rather that the SEC leaves information on the table. Both the SEC and big-firm
defendants have incentives to settle quickly and for high amounts, in exchange for
limiting the public release of damning information. Such information-

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\(^8\) Zapata Corp. v. Maldonado, 430 A2d. 779 (Del. 1981).

\(^9\) The regulatory competition literature deals with the consequences of states’ competition over
corporate charters: whether state corporate law represents a race to the top or to the bottom (or not a

underproduction dynamics are good for both parties but bad for society overall. I then discuss potential solutions to the problem, including evaluating the proper scope of judicial review of SEC actions.\footnote{The issue of the proper scope of judicial review currently awaits consideration by the Court of Appeals in SEC v. Citigroup Inc., No. 11-5227 (2d. Cir. Dec. 20, 2011).}

I then conclude by briefly synthesizing the Article’s various insights, clarifying their relation to the existing literature, and outlining avenues for further research.
PART I: HOW THE LAW SHAPES REPUTATIONAL SANCTIONS: A GENERAL FRAMEWORK

To figure out how the law affects reputation, we first need to understand how reputation works. This Part fleshes out two basic points about the dynamics of reputational sanctioning, which were previously overlooked by legal scholars.\(^{12}\) I first show that reputational assessments are inherently inaccurate. Legal scholars often assume that the only issue with reputational sanctioning is whether misconduct is revealed or not: once bad news breaks, the market supposedly reacts automatically. But in reality the market reaction itself is the issue. Market players often lack the information or incentives to accurately interpret revelations of misconduct. As a result, the market underreacts to some types of revealed misconduct and overreacts to others. I then show how the accuracy of reputational sanctions is dictated by the legal system. Because market players find it hard to calibrate reputational judgments on their own, they often look for information coming from the legal system as a second opinion that helps them revise their initial reaction. In other words, the market reaction to revealed misconduct is shaped by the legal system’s reaction. The law thus affects behavior indirectly by shaping reputational sanctions. I finish by providing a blueprint for applying this general reputational theory of the law to specific legal fields.

A. Reputational Sanctions: How They Work, and Why They Are Noisy

A company’s reputation can be defined as the set of beliefs that stakeholders hold regarding the company’s quality. Stakeholders cannot directly observe the company’s abilities and intentions. As a result, stakeholders form a rough proxy: using the company’s past actions as cues, they evaluate how the company is likely to behave in the future.\(^{13}\) Customers make purchasing decisions based on their


\(^{13}\) A company’s reputation can be thought of as the cash value of the trust that different stakeholders put in the company. Karpoff, supra note 4, at 363. I refrain from using the notion of trust here, in order to avoid confusion between Bayesian belief-updating models and repeated-interaction models of reputation. See Luis Cabral, The Economics of Trust and Reputation (2005) (unpublished
expectations about product quality; employees decide whether to apply for a job based on their beliefs about how top management will treat them; and so forth.¹⁴

A reputational sanction is thus simply the process of updating beliefs and lowering expectations. When news about adverse actions by the company breaks, stakeholders downgrade their beliefs about the company’s quality. The company is now perceived as more likely to defect in the future, and so stakeholders’ willingness to deal with it decreases. For example, investors hearing about a corporate governance scandal will start demanding higher returns for their investment. The aggregate of diminished business opportunities constitutes the reputational sanction for violating market norms.

But the most interesting (and understudied) question remains: how exactly do stakeholders update their beliefs? How many business opportunities are diminished by a given misconduct? After all, we know from everyday experience that not all bad news is created equal. Similar adverse actions cause different reputational outcomes. Some companies weather bad news relatively unscathed while other companies go bankrupt. Some top executives take the fall when their companies misbehave while other executives are unaffected. So what explains the variation in market reactions? For our purposes, it suffices to focus on one important determinant of reputational sanctions: indicativeness of future behavior. Stakeholders learning about a corporate misconduct try to infer how indicative of future behavior the specific adverse action is. Remember that reputational sanctions rest on self-interest: stakeholders will punish the company only when they deem the bad news relevant to their own future interactions with the company.

In other words, the revelation of bad news about a company does not automatically translate into reputational sanctions. Public revelation of misconduct is a necessary but insufficient condition. The process of translating bad news into reputational assessments requires not just facts about what happened but also

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¹⁴ Reputation is thus somewhat audience-specific and attribute-specific: when talking about reputation we need to ask “reputation to whom”? “For what”?
interpretations of how things happened. To generalize: when stakeholders believe that the bad outcome resulted from an isolated temporary mistake (such as a rogue low-level employee), the reputational sanction will be relatively low. By contrast, when stakeholders believe that the bad outcome resulted from a deep-seated organizational flaw (such as a total breakdown of checks and balances), the reputational sanction will be relatively high. After all, no one wants to work for, buy from, or invest in companies with deep-rooted problems that will likely resurface.\textsuperscript{15}

The next crucial step is to acknowledge that market players often have the wrong perception of how things happened. Stakeholders often interpret an isolated mistake as a deep-seated flaw, and vice versa. Several factors combine to make reputational assessments systematically noisy.

Firstly, stakeholders are asymmetrically informed about the inner workings of the company. While market players may know with some certainty \textit{what} happened, it is usually hard for outsiders to tell exactly \textit{how} things happened: what top managers knew, when they knew it, and so forth.\textsuperscript{16} Secondly, even when stakeholders have information, they process it imperfectly. Judgment biases sway our reputational assessments. For instance, stakeholders tend to overly focus on salient and available issues, and attribute bad outcomes to internal rather than external causes.\textsuperscript{17}

Thirdly, those who dispense reputational sanctions have their own private incentives, which diverge from the public interest in accurate reputational

\textsuperscript{15} A good illustration of these dynamics of reputational sanctions comes from stock market reactions to airplane crashes. A study found that the market reacts differently depending on how the crash was reported by the press. When the Wall Street Journal attributes the crash to internal causes, such as maintenance problems, the stock prices decline dramatically. By contrast, when the Journal reports that the crash was caused by external conditions, such as unanticipated weather conditions, the market does not react negatively. Mark L. Mitchell & Michael T. Maloney, \textit{Crisis in the Cockpit? The Role of Market Forces in Promoting Air Travel Safety}, 32 J. L. Econ. 329 (1989).

\textsuperscript{16} Stakeholders are thus asymmetrically informed about “second-level information”: we observe the bad outcomes but are unaware of the circumstances that led to them. Oliver E. Williamson, \textit{The Economic Institutions of Capitalism} 396 (1985).

\textsuperscript{17} Both the tendency to overly focus on silent issues and the tendency to overly attribute bad outcomes to internal causes are well-known biases that sway our judgments in many other contexts. On their applicability to the reputational judgments context see, e.g., Donald Lange et al., \textit{Organizational Reputation: A Review}, 37 J. Manag. 153, 173 (2011); Andrea M. Sjøval & Andrew C. Talk, \textit{From Actions to Impressions: Cognitive Attribution Theory and the Formation of Corporate Reputation}, 7 Corp. Rep. Rev. 269, 274-275 (2004).
assessments. Reputation systems are not operated by public officials. Neither are they simply the aggregate of atomistic individual decisions. Rather, reputational sanctions in mass markets are largely determined by the interpretations and diffusion of information through intermediaries. We form impressions of companies based not just on our direct interactions, but mostly on what we gather from stock analysts, institutional investors, corporate watchdogs, and mass media. These intermediaries have incentives to push the market towards overreacting to some behaviors and underreacting to others. For example, a corporate watchdog may have incentives to publish exaggerated criticisms against salient companies, because eliciting a strong market reaction will help the watchdog to win the competition for donors' money and volunteers’ time. And a profit-minded newspaper owner may prefer to avoid investing in the risky venture of investigating opaque corporate shenanigans, focusing instead on rebroadcasting publicly available information. In general, even when intermediaries manage to overcome their own biases, they cater to their constituents’ biases.

Indeed, recent empirical studies show that the media targets companies based not on the social harm done, but rather on visibility and resentment. For example, the financial media criticize executive stock-option plans based on high value at the exercising date (which is a function of external conditions) rather than at the granting date (which is more related to the strength of corporate governance). Similarly, the media criticize shady accounting practices based on the visibility of companies rather than the size of the discrepancy: large, well-known companies get more negative coverage for more minor deviations.

Taken together, the emerging pieces of evidence suggest that reputational

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sanctions exact heavy social costs. The costs of reputational sanctions stem not just from instances where the market does not detect corporate misbehavior. Even when market players become aware of corporate misconduct, their reaction to it is often inaccurate. Stakeholders may stop doing business with perfectly fine companies; or they may ignore early warning signs and continue doing business with rotten companies. Most importantly, the evidence suggests that the market systematically overreacts to certain misbehaviors and underreacts to others.\(^{22}\) Not all mistakes in reputational assessments cancel themselves out. As a result, reputational forces distort primary behavior. Companies may pick projects based on their reputational value and not on their “real” value. Reputational incentives push companies to excessively avoid some worthy behaviors (reputational overdeterrence), and excessively engage in some bad behaviors (reputational underdeterrence).

So far we have explained why market players, when left alone, will have trouble producing accurate reputation information. But in reality the market is rarely left alone. Adverse actions are interpreted and assessed not just by market arbiters, but also by legal arbiters. The legal system produces as a by-product an informational public good: a version of what and how things happened in given cases.\(^{23}\) The next Section maps the different ways in which the information coming out of the legal system affects reputational sanctions.

**B. How Litigation Affects Reputation**

Many Law and Social Norms analyses assume away complementarities between law and reputation, instead treating the two systems as independent of each other.\(^{24}\) In

\(^{22}\) For an elaboration see Shapira, *supra* note 17, at Section I.C (also providing examples of biases that lead to over/underdeterrence, such as the state of the overall economy (the market underreacts when the economy is booming and overreacts when the economy is down); the saliency of the issue in question; and the type of harm done (the market underreacts to multiple small harms and concealed harms, and overreacts to harms to easily identifiable victims)).


\(^{24}\) For the conventional approach see footnote 12 *supra*. To illustrate, consider Polinsky and Shavell’s proposal to abolish product liability for widely sold products. The logic of such a proposal is that if nonlegal forces are strong enough to carry most of the burden of deterrence, then it is not cost-effective to keep a costly adjudication system simply for the sake of an incremental contribution to deterrence. Mitchell Polinsky & Steven Shavell, *The Uneasy Case for Product Liability*, 123 Harv. L.
this Section I challenge the conventional view by fleshing out two channels through which the law influences reputational sanctions: “first-opinion effects” which occur before the market reacts to misconduct and “second-opinion effects” which occur after the market’s initial reaction.

1. First-Opinion Effects

The first type of effects that the law generates is that of setting a reputational sanction in motion. The most intuitive and studied example comes from disclosure requirements, which incentivize corporate decision-makers to publicly reveal information relating to corporate misconduct. Whistleblower laws also mitigate the asymmetric information about corporate failures, by incentivizing employees to reveal information about their companies’ misconduct. Aside from legislation and regulations, litigation – our focus in this Article – can also draw market players’ attention to previously unnoticed corporate misbehavior. Sometimes the company breaches its explicit or implicit contractual obligations towards a certain stakeholder, but the harmed party finds it too costly to communicate the violation to third parties. The legal system gives the harmed party a right to sue the company for damages, thus indirectly setting the wheels of reputational sanctions in motion. The mere filing of a lawsuit (not to mention information revealed during litigation) may attract the attention of other stakeholders and propel them to downgrade their beliefs about the company. In all these cases, the law has a “revealing misconduct” effect on the market. When the legal system facilitates the injection of new information into the market, it reduces the detection costs of reputation control systems, thus increasing the chances that misbehavior will be punished by the market.

Another channel through which the law sets reputational sanctions in motion is through reduction of the enforcement costs of reputation control systems: the costs of

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Rev. 1437 (2010). At the heart of such an argument lies an implicit assumption that the legal system and the nonlegal system are independent of each other. Polinsky and Shavell assume that we can remove the law – remove the background threat of litigation – and the market forces will continue to function just the same.

acting against detected misbehavior. After all, not all revealed misconduct is automatically punished by the market. Sometimes market players know the facts (i.e., learn about a certain suspect behavior), but are unclear about what norms are pertinent to the facts. The legal system helps by clarifying – either in legislation or through judicial opinions – the proper standards of market behavior. By demarcating clear norms judges/legislatures make it easy for market players to realize whether the line was crossed in a given case. Such a “clarifying standards” notion has much in common with rational choice theories of expressive law.

In both instances – revealing misconduct and clarifying standards – litigation can push market players to react to corporate misconduct. But there are many situations where market players do not need any pushing. Misconduct by large public companies is often revealed (and acted upon) long before a legal complaint is even filed. Indeed, a recent comprehensive empirical study found that the filing of a lawsuit was responsible for breaking news about financial misconduct in only 6.4% of revealed violations. Market players often learn about misbehavior from other sources, such as investigative reporters, whistleblowers, or financial reporting. Still, even when the legal system’s reaction is lagged it may nevertheless affect the market, albeit in a different way, to which we turn next.

2. Second-Opinion Effects

The same bad news that triggered market reaction may eventually propel plaintiffs’ lawyers to file a lawsuit or a regulator to initiate investigations. Then, in the process of determining whether to impose legal sanctions, the legal system often produces information on questions such as what top managers knew and when they knew it. The information produced during litigation or investigations thus creates another “third-party assessment” of the company’s behavior. And because such

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26 The terminology follows Robert Clark’s typology in Laws, Markets and Morals (2010).
28 Jonathan Karpoff et al., Database Challenges in Financial Misconduct Research 15 (2013) (unpublished manuscript), http://ssrn.com/abstract=2112569. The filing of a lawsuit lags the date in which the market first learned about misconduct by a median of 23 and an average of 150 days. Id.
information is often publicly available, it allows market players to reevaluate their initial assessment of the company.

In that aspect, the legal system’s lagged version generates second-opinion effects in reputation markets. In the second-opinion analogy, stakeholders face a decision on how to update beliefs about a misbehaving company: market arbiters (media, watchdogs, analysts) are the first-opinion givers, and legal arbiters are the second-opinion givers. The legal system’s version often makes a high-quality second opinion because it is more accurate and nuanced than the market’s initial reaction. The value of the legal system’s second opinion can stem from the opinion-givers themselves: judges are often perceived as more expert and/or disinterested than typical market arbiters (such as columnists or watchdogs). More importantly, the legal system vests powers in its players (judges, investigators, or private litigants) to probe and demand inside information. As a result, the legal system’s version often relies on information to which market arbiters were not privy when they made their initial assessments. A classic example comes from the revelation during discovery of intra-company e-mail communications that tell us exactly what top managers knew and when they knew it.

The legal system can thus serve as a safety valve for reputation systems. In instances where market players greatly under- or overreacted the legal system later provides a more balanced perspective of how things happened, thereby allowing market players to go back and correct their initial assessment.

But even more important than correcting specific under/overreactions ex post, the mere background threat of litigation affects all future reputational assessments ex ante. The possibility of litigation disciplines those who dispense reputational sanctions. Market arbiters anticipate the possibility that nuanced information on the misbehavior in question will later be produced in litigation, and invest more in their initial assessments. In that sense, the legal system facilitates a market for corporate watchdogs’ reputation. Information produced during litigation helps stakeholders better assess not only the behavior of defendant companies, but also the expertise
and integrity of watchdogs. The background threat of litigation also affects those who suffer from reputational sanctions. Faced with the possibility that their denials will be exposed in discovery as lies, the misbehaving companies are more disciplined in how they fight accusations.

3. Multiple Layers of Reputation Information

One important clarification is in order: I do not claim that the legal system is categorically better and more accurate than reputation systems. Like reputation systems, the legal system’s assessments suffer from a plethora of distortions, such as asymmetric information, lack of expertise, strategic behavior, and divergent incentives. Indeed, in many cases we cannot trust the legal system to produce the positive externality of accurate reputation information. And so I do not portray the legal and market systems in a horserace over who produces more accurate information. I rather view the two systems as providing multiple layers of reputation information.

The combination of two flawed systems (legal and reputation) produces better reputation assessments than each system on its own. This is because the systems’ flaws are imperfectly correlated. Some of the distortions of the market’s first opinion are cancelled out by the legal system’s second opinion, and vice versa. The two systems can be thought of as creating a diversified portfolio of reputational assessments, mitigating the risk of extreme mistakes (that is, the risk that stakeholders will boycott perfectly good companies or interact with rotten companies). Indeed, the literature on second opinions in other contexts has long recognized that a combination of a “hot” first opinion and a “cold” second opinion is often optimal. The market system strikes first and produces information that is more timely and accessible than the version produced by the legal system. The legal system then produces information that is often more accurate and complete than the initial market’s version.

29 See Shapira, supra note 17, at notes 117–121 and accompanying text.
Overall, the existence of a well-functioning legal system facilitates better reputation systems. Still, in specific contexts the information produced during litigation has zero or even negative impact on reputational evaluations. In order to predict better the reputational impact we need to introduce more context-specific details, focusing on one area of market activity and law at a time. The next Section shows how to apply the theory to specific legal fields.

C. Applying the General Framework to Specific Legal Fields
What are the conditions that determine the magnitude and direction of reputational consequences? One way to answer this question is to adopt a supply-and-demand framework. The legal system impacts reputational sanctions only when market players are constantly looking to reevaluate their beliefs (high demand), and the legal institutions are perceived as a capable and credible source of information (supply meets demand). Many legal disputes – think for example about family law or torts committed by individuals – interest only the disputants themselves. The demand for information production in such disputes is virtually zero. In other legal disputes the demand for reputation information may be great but the legal system fails to supply quality information. Think for example about medical malpractice: the reputation of caregivers is important and extremely hard to assess. But since the legal arbiters presiding over medical malpractice disputes are inexpert jurors who do not produce detailed opinions, the legal system supplies little meaningful reputation information.

In the context of corporate and securities litigation it seems that both conditions of the supply-and-demand equation are met. The demand for credible reputation information is high. Stakeholders have every reason to continuously reevaluate their assessment of companies’ abilities and intension. The combination of high stakes involved in interacting with companies and various asymmetric information problems increases the value of getting second opinions on the quality of management integrity.\(^{32}\) And private intermediaries such as securities analysts or

institutional investors enjoy enough sophistication and resources to mine legal proceedings for second opinions. In other words, players in the market for publicly traded companies are more interested in the empirical truth and de-biasing of information than consumers of news in other contexts. Indeed, recent empirical studies show that sophisticated investors continuously monitor and react to information disseminated during litigation.

On the supply side, the main adjudicators of corporate behavior – Delaware courts – are well positioned to provide timely, comprehensible, and thorough reputation information, for several reasons. First, Delaware courts are well respected in the legal and business communities. The nonpolitical appointment process (Delaware judges frequently come from the bar) and the specialized docket allow judges to develop expertise and a broad perspective on market norms. Second, the specialized and small docket also enables Delaware judges to adjudicate disputes relatively quickly, producing information in a timely manner. Finally, the legal doctrines in Delaware corporate law – both procedural and substantive – are geared towards providing reputation-relevant information.

The upshot is that corporate litigation is likely to have a meaningful effect on the reputation of businessmen and companies. The next question, then, is: how? Or: in what direction? Does litigation necessarily increase the reputational sanction attached to misconduct? Does it affect the reputations of individual managers


34 See Vladimir Atanasov et al., Does Reputation Limit Opportunistic Behavior in the VC Industry? Evidence from Litigation against VCs, 67 J. Fin. 2215 (2012) (venture capitalists’ reputation is affected by information produced in early stages of litigation); Lars H. Haβ & Maximilian A. Müller, Capital Market Consequences of Corporate Fraud (2011) (unpublished manuscript), http://www.eea-esem.com/files/papers/eea-esem/2012/988/paper.pdf (same argument applies also outside the VC context). In an interview conducted with a representative of Courtroom Connect – a company that streams online webcasts of Delaware trials – I learned that an important clientele of streaming services is institutional investors who monitor legal disputes in real time and alter investment decisions accordingly. Footnote 5 supra.


37 I elaborate on this point in Section IV.A infra.
differently than it affects organizations? The next Part explores these issues in depth, in the context of fiduciary duty litigation.

PART II: CORPORATE LITIGATION’S IMPACT ON NONLEGAL SANCTIONS

How does corporate law work? This question has puzzled corporate legal scholarship for decades. The puzzle stems from the apparent lack of legal sanctions. Corporate decision-makers practically never pay out of pocket for their misbehavior, and so presumably the law lacks teeth. An influential strand of the literature suggested that corporate law’s teeth consist in facilitating nonlegal sanctions. But so far the existing accounts have failed to develop a satisfactory theory of how nonlegal forces work or how exactly the law facilitates them.

I start this Part by identifying the gaps in the existing approach. Current accounts focus on how judicial comments induce guilty feelings among misbehaving directors, or social shaming among the misbehaving directors’ peers. In other words, the current approach deals narrowly with how verdicts ramp up the moral sanctions for misbehaving. In reality, though, verdicts are rare and the moral rebukes offered in them seldom reach their presumed audiences. It therefore makes sense to shift our focus to how the litigation process as a whole (not just verdicts) shapes the reputational (not just moral) sanctions for misbehaving. I outline three important factors that determine how information from the courtroom translates into the court of public opinion. The main takeaway point is that, counterintuitively, not every case of judicial scolding hurts the defendants’ reputation. To predict the reputational impact we need to ask who is the judge scolding (an ousted individual or an unhealthy corporate culture?); what is she scolding for (honest incompetence or calculated disregard for shareholder interests?); and what her scolding adds to the preexisting information environment.

38 Footnote 1 supra. The main justifications for refraining from sanctioning are discouragement of productive risk-taking in businesses, judicial incompetence, and the ability of shareholders to fend for themselves by diversifying risks.
39 See Rock, supra note 2.
A. Litigation’s Impact on Moral Sanctions: “Saints and Sinners” Revisited

Delaware fiduciary duty litigation features a striking pattern: no sanctioning but lots of talking. Delaware judges usually refrain from imposing legal sanctions on company decision-makers, but they do not shy away from criticizing the directors’ behavior whenever they see fit. This fact pattern of lengthy, fact-intensive, judgmental verdicts raises a puzzle: what is the point in preaching if you are not going to sanction? If Delaware courts are not enforcing fiduciary duties, why do they bother talking so much about them?

Several prominent corporate legal scholars suggest a solution to this puzzle: preaching is the point, they claim. Preaching is not an afterthought but rather the main function of Delaware decisional law. It is through richly detailed narratives of good and bad corporate behavior that Delaware judges control corporate behavior.

Once the morality tales of corporate saints and sinners become publicly available they unleash all sorts of nonlegal forces. In one version of this “saints and sinners” approach to corporate law, directors hate being dressed down in verdicts because it reduces the esteem that they get from colleagues and peers (“external moral sanctions”). In another version, directors who are subject to judicial scolding suffer not from disesteem of others but rather from their own sense of guilt (“internal moral sanctions”). And because judges elicit the opprobrium of third parties and/or guilt feelings of first parties simply by what they say, they get to sanction and deter misbehavior without imposing legal sanctions.

The saints and sinners theory of corporate law does a great job of spotlighting one indirect deterrence element of corporate law. It correctly directs our attention to the possibility that corporate litigation shapes behavior not just through the outcomes but also through the content of judicial opinions. But as the following paragraphs

40 For empirical support for the argument that Delaware courts rely heavily on moralism see John C. Coates, One Hat Too Many? Delaware’s Moralism in M&A Contract Enforcement (2011) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).
41 The two most representative accounts are Rock, supra note 2, and Blair & Stout, supra note 1. While there are various other accounts of corporate law and social norms that vary in nuances, they all share enough similarities to be grouped for our purposes under the “saints and sinners” umbrella term.
42 See Rock, id.
43 See Blair & Stout, supra note 1.
explain, the existing approach has too narrow a focus. I propose here a shift in perspective: from focusing just on how judicial comments affect moral judgments to focusing on how the litigation process as a whole affects reputational judgments.

First, focusing just on judicial opinions is problematic because most legal disputes settle. Judges get very few chances to offer moral rebukes in verdicts. Cases that settle do not produce moralistic impact; but they may nevertheless affect the market reaction: not by shaping moral beliefs but rather by shaping factual beliefs. The process itself prior to settlements (pleading, discovery, trial) sheds light on reputation-relevant information. Indeed, recent empirical studies show that market players monitor and react to events during the early stages of the process.

Second, focusing just on moralistic impact is problematic because the typical verdict sends mixed messages: by legally exonerating the defendants, the verdict dilutes the power of any moralistic condemnations made in dicta. The magnitude of legal sanctions embodies the blameworthiness of behavior. Directors are less likely to suffer guilt, and third parties are less likely to engage in shaming, when the legal system tells them that the behavior in question is not bad enough to merit legal sanctioning. Reputational sanctions, by contrast, are less strongly correlated with legal sanctions. The trial’s outcome is based on specific legal doctrines that may not be relevant to reputational evaluations. Consider for example a scenario where the judge rules in favor of the defendant company, yet her opinion contains remarks indicating that the company’s misconduct stems from deep-rooted flaws. In such cases, the legal consequences are positive but the reputational consequences will be

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44 For acknowledgments that existing accounts focus on moralistic and not reputational consequences, see, e.g., Rock, supra note 2, at 1013 (focusing on disesteem); David A. Skeel, Shaming in Corporate Law, 149 U. Pa. L. Rev. 1811, 1814, 1856 (2001) (focusing on moral disapproval). The few analyses that touch the reputational outcomes of litigation do not develop it into a full theory. See, e.g., Gordon, supra note 32, at 1489.

45 See Miller, supra note 35, at 329.

46 Footnote 34 supra. See also Gorga & Halberstam, supra note 23 (the corporate law literature fails to recognize the importance of discovery in shaping corporate behavior); John Lytton, Holding Bishops Accountable 205 (2008).

negative. Conversely, a judge may assign liability to the company, but her opinion will make clear that the misbehavior was carried out by a rogue employee and is unlikely to reoccur. In that case the legal consequences are negative but the reputational consequences will likely be positive.48

Finally, moral rebukes often get lost in translation. Directors normally do not read judicial opinions. And the lawyers who summarize the verdicts for directors usually screen out the caustic comments in their memos to their clients.49 The rebukes rarely reach their presumed audiences. The power of moral rebukes to propel individuals to engage in costly punishing depends largely on striking the right tone and tenor – factors that easily get lost in translation.50 Reputational information, by contrast, is less sensitive to distorted transmission. Reputational sanctioning is an exercise in self-interest, and so sophisticated investors do not wait for someone to strike the right tone and propel them to act. They stand to gain from proactively mining litigation for hard information.51

These three problems – lack of opinions, sanctions, and communication channels – illustrate why it makes sense to focus on reputational rather than moralistic impact. The next Section proceeds to explain how we should focus on reputational impact: highlighting the main factors that determine how information from litigation translates into reputational sanctions.

B. Litigation’s Impact on Reputational Sanctions: Towards a Novel Approach

The starting point of a reputational theory of corporate law is a “negative” one, telling us what we cannot do: we cannot simply assume that litigation hurts the

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48 The fall of Bankers Trust is a case in point. The company fought its clients in litigation and won. But the legal victory proved pyrrhic: information produced in litigation about the cynical and ruthless corporate culture hurt the company’s reputation and eventually sunk the company. See Macey, supra note 32, at 77-8. To generalize: the legal outcome is usually determined from a backward-looking perspective, while a reputational outcome is usually determined from a forward-looking perspective (how indicative of future behavior the adverse action is). As a result, the correlation between legal and reputational outcomes is very imperfect.


50 Id.

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reputation of the companies and the businessmen involved. Reputational sanctions work in fuzzy ways that do not lend themselves to generalizations. Counterintuitively, sometimes judicial scolding may actually help the defendant company’s reputation. In this Section I build on insights from the Reputation and Crisis Management literatures in order to take the next, “positive” steps for a reputational theory: generate testable predictions. I flesh out three key questions we should ask when trying to predict the reputational outcomes of specific disputes.

First we should ask “scolding who?” There is a huge difference between criticizing singled-out individuals and criticizing the company’s systematic failures. In other words, a reputational theory should distinguish between individual- and organizational-level reputations. Second, we should ask “scolding compared to what?” In legal disputes with big and visible companies, information coming from the legal system is not being read in isolation but rather appears against the background of an already existing market reaction. In most cases stakeholders have already learned about the misbehavior and formed opinions. A reputational analysis of litigation should therefore concentrate on relative impact: do not ask whether the judge’s version is unfavorable to the company – ask whether it is more/less favorable than the prevalent version accepted in the market prior to litigation. Finally, we should ask “scolding for what?” In reputational terms, the type of sin matters: there is a difference between bad outcomes caused by honest incompetence and bad outcomes caused by calculated disregard for market norms.


Litigation affects the reputation of individuals differently than it affects companies. Legal scholars usually ignore this distinction altogether, implicitly assuming that any judicial scolding of individuals reflects badly on their companies. But the Reputation literature suggests that scolding an individual does not necessarily impact the company’s reputation negatively. It depends on factors such as the scolded individual’s place in the hierarchy, whether she still holds office,

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52 But see Skeel, supra note 44, at 1855.
or what other top managers knew about her actions.\textsuperscript{53} Granted, in many cases the intuitive answer applies: dressing down an individual manager does reflect badly on the company. But there are also common scenarios where, counterintuitively, \textit{dressing down specific managers may actually boost the company’s reputation} (or at least not hurt it). Consider two examples.

First, the judge often dresses down a manager who is already gone or on her way out of the company. Such judicial finger-wagging would probably damage the ousted manager’s labor-market reputation, but it could help repair the company’s reputation. This is because singling out one individual as a sinner gives rise to a “scapegoating” dynamic. As the crisis management literature shows, one of the most effective recovery strategies for companies is decoupling: acknowledging the problem while isolating and localizing it.\textsuperscript{54} And scapegoating is an especially effective form of decoupling. By attributing the problem to a rogue element that was subsequently purged, the company distances itself from the wrongdoing. Accordingly, when a judge singles out the ousted manager for opprobrium, she lends credibility to the decoupling claims and directs the public’s attention away from more systematic problems.

In another typical scenario the judge scolds a manager for making mistakes out of incompetence. Here again, the individual’s labor-market reputation will probably take a hit (who wants to hire an incompetent manager?). But the impact on the company’s reputation is not necessarily negative, and could even be positive. Crisis management experts maintain that companies in crises stand better chances of repairing their reputation when individual managers are portrayed as less than perfect.\textsuperscript{55} If stakeholders perceive the leader as perfect and in total control, they assume that she could have prevented the adverse outcome. As a result, stakeholders


\textsuperscript{55} See Dezenhall & Weber, footnote 53 supra.
will interpret the company’s misconduct as intentional and indicative of future behavior (that is, arising from deep-rooted disregard for shareholder interests and market norms in general). By contrast, if stakeholders perceive the leader as less than perfect, they are more likely to interpret the adverse outcomes as a result of more easily fixable mistakes.\footnote{To be sure, in the business world it is sometimes better to be (perceived as) immoral than incompetent. Still, there are areas where incompetence is considered less deep-seated and easier to root out than lack of integrity. Cf. John Hendry, \textit{The Principal’s Other Problems: Honest Incompetence and the Specification of Objectives}, 27 Acad. Manag. Rev. 98 (2002) (identifying contexts where shareholders can more easily replace an incompetent element than root out moral hazard); Kimberly D. Elsbach, \textit{Organizational Perception Management} 60 (2006)}

2. **Scolding Compared to What? What Information is Available vs. How It Is Diffused**

   Misconduct by large, publicly traded firms is usually tried in the court of public opinion before it is tried in courts.\footnote{Footnote 28 supra.} As a result, the judge’s verdict is often a lagged second opinion. Stakeholders with enough stake and sophistication to mine verdicts for information do not read verdicts in isolation. Rather, they compare the judge’s version to existing versions produced by market arbiters. Any analysis of litigation’s reputational impact should thus ask what relative addition/subtraction of reputational sanctions was produced by the verdict. Such an analysis requires \textit{understanding the baseline: the pre-verdict information environment.}

   It is useful to break down the pre-verdict information environment into two stages: before and after the lawsuit is filed. When bad news breaks market players react to it almost immediately, while the legal system often takes some time to get involved. And the trivial yet overlooked point is that a lot of information is produced before the legal system gets involved. When the company or issue at hand is salient and attractive enough, private info-intermediaries have incentives to quickly find out the facts about what happened\footnote{A typical example comes from interviewing former insiders who deliver juicy details on how things went wrong. \textit{See generally} Alexander Dyck et al., \textit{Who Blows the Whistle on Corporate Fraud}, J. Fin. 2213 (2010).} and offer interpretations about how it happened.\footnote{A typical example comes from critical editorials that couch the story under some catchable category such as a story about corporate greed or power-tripping CEOs. \textit{See generally} Dezenhall & Weber, \textit{supra} note 53, at 15, 39.}
Then, after a complaint is filed, more information is produced in the early stages of litigation (post-filing but pre-verdict). Information produced during pleading, discovery, and trial shapes reputational sanctions through two channels: facts and framing. The process gives market players more raw facts and inside information to work with, such as internal e-mail communications or board minutes that provide details about what top managers did (or did not do) to prevent the failure. The litigation process produces also readily available packaging of the facts. Plaintiffs, defendants, and third-party intermediaries often use tidbits from different stages (complaint, motion to dismiss, expert testimonies) to help their specific interpretations gain traction in the court of public opinion.60

Between the information produced by private info-intermediaries and information produced during the litigation process, not much new information (if any) is produced in judicial opinions. Verdicts contain mostly stale information. To be sure, verdicts still matter in the court of public opinion. But they matter in different and hitherto understudied ways. The main impact of verdicts is not in introducing new information but rather in affecting how existing information is diffused.

The last point deserves elaboration. Corporate legal scholars usually ignore issues arising from diffusion of information. We assume that market players either have or do not have information; or that once information is revealed it will be fully reflected in stock prices.61 But in reality the way that information is diffused matters. Information intermediaries matter. For example, a burgeoning empirical literature shows that the scope and tone of media coverage affects market reactions to stale information.62 A classic illustration comes from a study finding that a front-page

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60 Cf. Lytton, supra note 46, at 201 (on the framing role of litigation processes in general).
62 See Brian J. Bushee et al., The Role of the Business Press as an Information Intermediary, 48 J. Acc. Res. 1 (2010) (coverage by mass media affects stock returns even when not breaking new information); Lily Fang & Joel Peress, Media Coverage and the Cross-section of Stock Returns, 64 J. Fin. 2023 (2009) (same). The scope of media coverage affects the market by drawing the attention of more investors to information that was previously known only to a small group of sophisticated investors. See, e.g., Paul C. Tetlock, Does Public Financial News Resolve Asymmetric Information?,
New York Times article about a biotech company caused the stock prices to skyrocket, even though the article contained no new information and was actually repeating information that the Times previously had published in a back-page story.\footnote{See Gur Huberman & Tomer Regev, \textit{Contagious Speculation and a Cure for Cancer: A Nonevent that Made Stock Prices Soar}, 56 J. Fin. 387 (2001).}

Accordingly, to the extent that judicial opinions (or more generally litigation) affect the scope and tone of media coverage, they impact reputational assessments even without producing new information. Much like earlier stages in the process, judicial opinions often affect the saliency and credibility of existing information. Judicial opinions add saliency by recalling the attention of the media to a certain issue, providing media reporters with ready-made quotes, and reducing the journalists’ risk of defamation liability.\footnote{See Tamar Frankel, \textit{Court of Law and Court of Public Opinion: Symbiotic Regulation of the Corporate Management Duty of Care}, 3 N.Y.U. J. L. & Bus. 353, 357 (2007); Lytton, supra note 46, at 95.} Opinions also add credibility by certifying existing information.\footnote{See Shapira, supra note 17, at Section II.A (the Salomon Brothers and Arthur Anderson crises illustrate how litigation/investigations can lend credibility or discard the company’s version).}

After all, not all sources of information are created equal: stakeholders are more likely to update their beliefs when the information comes from a well-respected judge than when the same information comes from directly interested or less-reputable private parties.

Finally, opinions also add framing to existing information. The judge’s version helps market players to assess the right packaging for an existing set of facts. The next Section explains how the framing effects of verdicts work in counterintuitive ways.


The final key question to consider is what type of sin the judge is highlighting.

\footnote{For studies showing that stakeholders react differently to identical pieces of information coming from different sources, see DellaVigna & Gentzkow, supra note 18, at 657; Cass Sunstein \textit{Breaking up the Echo}. N. Y. Times, Sept. 17, 2012 (people revisit their priors only when information comes from “surprising validators”).}
We cannot simply assume that whenever a judge frames the events as indicating that defendants sinned, she hurts the individuals’/companies’ reputations. In reality the reputational impact varies greatly depending on the type of sin for which the defendants are scolded. The sin of incompetence is seen differently than the sin of immorality or total disregard for norms. The sin of breaching contractual commitments is seen differently than externalizing costs on third parties, such as polluting the environment or bribing in foreign countries.

Here one counterintuitive observation is especially intriguing: the judge’s version, even when containing caustic criticism, typically supports a framing that is relatively favorable to the company. The preexisting framing is tilted by market and social arbiters’ incentives to pile on criticism once bad news break, and the allegation-driven media’s incentives to highlight sound-bites from the plaintiffs’ lawyers post-filing. As a result, the preexisting version usually makes even caustic verdicts seem nuanced when compared to the baseline.

Therein lies the rub in the saints and sinners approach: people are not exclusively saints or sinners, and judges know that. According to the saints and sinners argument, the judges’ role is to help market players realize that certain defendants are sinners. But in reality the order and roles are reversed: the market reacts first by painting accused businessmen in black. And the judge often repaints a more richly detailed picture in shades of grey. The court of public opinion tends to categorize businessmen/companies as complete heroes or complete villains. And judges’

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Footnote 56 _supra_.

Footnote 56 _supra_.

Empirical studies show that when companies hurt their trade partners (as in breaching contracts), their reputation takes a hit; but when companies misbehave towards unspecified third parties (as in polluting the environment), there is no reputational harm. See Karpoff, _supra_ note 4.

See Wiesenfeld et al., _supra_ note 19, at 240-2.

To be sure, there are exceptions: cases where the judge’s version depicts the defendants in all-black. One example comes from a famous corporate philanthropy case, where the directors were sued for approving an $80-million donation to build a museum named after a retiring CEO. The Delaware judge did not directly interfere with the directors’ decision, but made it clear that if he were a shareholder he would vote against them. See Kahn v. Sullivan, 594 A.2d 48 (S. Ct. Del. 1991); Claire Hill & Brett McDonnell, _Executive Compensation and the Optimal Penumbra of Delaware Corporate Law_, 4 Va. L. & Bus. Rev. 333, 357 (2009).


Mass media in particular looks for entertainment value and is therefore allegation-driven rather
interpretations – even when critical of defendants – tend to be more contextual. Accordingly, the relative effect of judicial comments on reputation is not necessarily negative, and sometimes even positive. For the judge’s narrative to affect the company’s reputation positively it does not have to be a resounding endorsement of the defendants’ behavior. It only has to make the bad situation appear less bad, for example, by showing that the adverse action does not reflect the company’s operational philosophy.73

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Drawing on theoretical and empirical advancements in the multidisciplinary Reputation literature, I fleshed out one key point: judicial scolding does not necessarily translate into reputational sanctions. It is therefore not enough to note the phenomenon of judicial scolding; we should shift our focus to identifying what conditions make judicial scolding more (or less) likely to increase nonlegal sanctions. The next Part takes a step in that direction by delving into a case study of the famous Disney litigation.

PART III: THE DISNEY LITIGATION: A CASE STUDY

The Disney litigation is one of the most anticipated and discussed corporate law cases in decades.74 It revolved around the hiring and subsequent firing of Hollywood’s agent Michael Ovitz as Disney’s president. Ovitz failed to perform satisfactorily and was fired after a year, but not before collecting a $140-million termination package from Disney. Disney’s shareholders sued the directors for breaching their fiduciary duties in supervising the hiring and firing of Ovitz.75 After a lengthy battle at the pleading stage, the lawsuit proceeded to a full-fledged trial.

than nuance-driven. The media screens and diffuses mostly the bits of information that fit into templates. Stories of corporate villains, greed, and conspicuous spending sell more newspapers than contextual explanations. See Dezenhall & Weber, supra note 53, at 52.

73 Id. at 169, 187.


Chancellor Chandler then delivered a 170-page fact-intensive decision that was filled with caustic criticism but ultimately exonerated the defendants who walked away winning.

Many corporate legal scholars have since hailed the Disney decision as a paradigmatic example of the saints and sinners approach as illustrating how Delaware courts avoid legal sanctions while ramping up nonlegal sanctions, as exonerating while condemning. And this is exactly what makes Disney such an interesting case study for our purposes: a deeper look reveals that even this seemingly clear-cut example does not follow the saints and sinners theory’s predictions. Instead, it corroborates the alternative theory presented here. The Disney saga illustrates the reputational dynamics of big-case litigation: the verdict does not add new information, because almost every fact cited by the Chancellor was already covered by the media. Disney also illustrates how a seemingly caustic verdict when read in isolation is actually favorable to the company when considering our three key factors: the preexisting information, who the judge is scolding, and what he is scolding them for.

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76 See, e.g., Johnson, supra note 49, at 863 (“the opinion was a paragon of how Rock had earlier described Delaware opinion. It was detailed, normatively saturated, judgmental, and laced with scolding, sometimes acerbic, moral reproof”); Miller, supra note 35, at 326; David M. Wilson, Climate Change: The Real Threat to Delaware Corporate Law, 5 Entrepreneurial Bus. L. J. 481 (2010); Frankel, supra note 64, at 363-4.

77 To use the qualitative methodology jargon, I employ the Disney case-study here in a “constructivist” mode of research: to illustrate, shed light, and serve as a check on competing theoretical frameworks. Accordingly, I select the Disney case (and other cases throughout the Article) not randomly but rather “purposively.” The Disney litigation serves as a “crucial, ‘most likely’ case:” since it is widely considered the paradigmatic example for an existing approach (saints and sinners), digging deep into it illustrates the problems in the hegemonic theory and opens up space for my alternative framework. See The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research 69-70 (Given, ed., 2008).

78 To clarify: I do not claim that the Disney case-study and my qualitative empirical work more generally produce conclusive proofs of my theory or generate external validity in the sense used in quantitative studies. What my independent work (interviews, case-studies, content analysis) produces, I hope, is a rich theory, one that is valid in the modest sense of *prima facie* credibility. The Disney case-study, for examples, indicates the plausibility of the theory’s testable predictions. Moreover, by building on the work done through case-studies and interviews, we can better identify issues and pave the way for subsequent quantitative probes. To go back to the qualitative methodology jargon, this method is called “exploratory sequential mixed methods design:” the researcher approaches a new terrain with more qualitative methods, and then once he identifies initial patterns, he can look to corroborate them with a later quantitative stage. Id. at 527.
What distinguishes my reading of Disney from the numerous previous dissections of the case is the focus on relative nonlegal impact. Many scholars focused on doctrinal analysis but ignored the decision’s nonlegal impact. The scholars who did touch on the nonlegal impact simply noted the decision’s moralistic tone and assumed that it ramped up the nonlegal sanctions and deterrence. I adopt a different methodology that shifts our focus to the dynamics of reputational sanctions. Using a content analysis of the media coverage of the Ovitz debacle, I am able to explore how the reputational capital of Disney and its top managers fluctuated before, during, and after litigation. The media coverage analysis, supplemented with insights from my interviews with key players, allows us to decipher the relative reputational impact of litigation. In other words, by examining how the court of public opinion treated the Ovitz affair prior to the verdict, we can tease out the real difference that the verdict made as a second opinion.

A. Information Produced before Litigation Started

The Disney lawsuit was filed in 1997. But by that time the court of public opinion had already been in session for a year. And the company was losing, badly.

The media covered the Disney–Ovitz debacle extensively during 1996. Investigative journalists were the first to uncover the problems with Disney’s management. One lead story followed another, and by the second half of 1996 each medium was competing to come up with vivid details about the bad blood between Disney’s top managers. The early reports highlighted how Disney’s number one (Michael Eisner) ran his own show without checks and balances from the board.

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80 See Gerald Ferris et al., Personal Reputation in Organizations, in Organizational Behavior 222 (2d ed. 2003) (media coverage can be used as a proxy to decipher the historical record of reputation. However, the media does not only record but also affects reputation). An Appendix to this paper details the methodology that I followed when analyzing media coverage.


82 See, e.g., T. L. Stanley, Definite Difference at Disney, Mediaweek, Apr. 22, 1996.
while Disney’s new number two (Ovitz) was in over his head. At the time the company was denying the stories in an attempt to limit their negative reputational impact. But the denials rang hollow when investigative reporters exposed internal documents (such as Eisner’s internal memos tarnishing Ovitz) or quotes from former insiders going on record about Disney’s governance flaws.

Then in late 1996 the company could not deny the problems anymore. Ovitz was fired, and the company had to file press releases and submit information to the SEC. The injection of new information intensified the market reaction. It was then – via the company’s own reporting – that the public learned about the hefty severance package awarded to Ovitz after an unsatisfactory year at the helm. Now market and social arbiters were competing over who would offer stronger condemnations of Disney. Large institutional investors claimed to be enraged. The president of the National Association of Corporate Directors said that Disney’s board is “living in the dark ages” and is too beholden to Eisner. And practically all the major newspapers ran editorials that attributed the Ovitz debacle to a corporate culture of total disregard for shareholder interests and societal norms.

Overall, the media coverage of the Ovitz debacle was extensive in scope and unfavorable in tone from the get-go. Any stakeholder of Disney had the chance to learn about the problems and downgrade her beliefs about the company’s management integrity, before a lawsuit was even filed. Corporate legal scholars treat the 2005 verdict as setting a reputational sanction in motion. But in reality the

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84 A Vanity Fair story, for example, was based on interviews with dozens of former and current Disney insiders. Bryan Burrough & Kim Masters, The Mouse Trap, Vanity Fair, Dec. 1996.
86 See Kim Masters, The Keys to the Kingdom 380 (2000).
87 See, e.g., Holman W. Jenkins, Beavis and Butthead Do the Disney Shareholders, Wall St. J., Jan. 7, 1997 (as if the headline was not enough: “nobody in the real world… gets that kind of money for flubbing up after a year on the job”); A.M. Rosenthal, Hardtack for the Journey, N.Y. Times, Dec. 17, 1996; Masters, id. at 376-7.
88 Frankel, for example, claims that “[b]y telling the whole world what was happening within
reputational system was already in motion in 1996. Those involved in the Ovitz debacle suffered a huge initial reputational hit. Before litigation began the company was already depicted as the poster child for bad corporate governance, and its top managers were ridiculed. In fact, it was the reputational system that set the legal system in motion: the lawyers based their 1997 complaint on facts and interpretations taken straight from the media coverage.

**B. Information Produced during Litigation**

1. **The Impact of the Process**

   Once a complaint was filed, the mere process of litigation (pleading, discovery, trial) affected Disney’s reputation. The media coverage of the Disney litigation was not limited to the final verdict: it was in full effect in the discovery and trial stages, voluminous in scope and unfavorable in tone. It impacted defendants’ reputation at least as much as the verdict did.

   The first question to consider is what information was covered. The answer: almost everything. After the complaint finally passed the motion to dismiss stage in 2003, the media turned their attention back to the Ovitz debacle. Major financial newspapers sent designated reporters to camp in Delaware and report daily from the trial. And almost any meaningful tidbit of information submitted to court – such as plaintiffs’ experts’ reports or internal documents revealed in discovery – found its way to mass media and was quickly and widely diffused.

Disney the decision allows us to become somewhat of a peeping tom”, and that the decision “carves out a process by which the media becomes aware of an issue” (supra note 64, at 365, 367).

89 See, e.g., The One Time Lion-King, The Economist, Sept. 16, 2004 (noting in retrospect that under Eisner “Disney became a byword for poor corporate governance”); Nikky Finke, Poof! Mike Ovitz, from Sorcerer to Schmo, N. Y. Observer, Sept. 23, 1996 (describing Ovitz as powerless and Eisner’s whipping boy); Robert Slater, Ovitz 285 (1997) (same); IESE Bus. Sch. Case Study, Michael Eisner at Disney (2005) (noting in retrospect that Eisner went from being considered a business guru to a regular on Forbes’ annual list of World’s Worst CEOs, facing a shareholder revolt, and being forced to resign as chairman).

90 See John Gibeaut, Stock Responses, 89 ABA Journal 38, 38 (2003) (the initial lawsuit relied heavily on “conclusory statements from newspaper editorials about Ovitz’s highly publicized exit”).

91 See, e.g., Bruce Orwall, The Mousetrap, Wall St. J. Nov. 23, 2004, at A1 (covering internal memos that were exposed during discovery, where Eisner calls Ovitz a psychopath); Christopher Parkes, Disney Board Backed Ovitz Just Before He Was Sacked, Financial Times, Nov. 9, 2004 (same); Peter Larsen, Eisner Criticized in Ovitz Report, Financial Times, Feb. 27, 2004 (covering experts’ reports). The point here can be generalized: in most large legal disputes information leaks
The second question to consider is how information was covered by the press. The answer: negatively. The media used the information produced during litigation to paint an unfavorable picture of the company’s corporate governance and the individual directors’ competence and integrity. Media reporters spotlighted three themes in particular. Firstly, reporters painted a picture of disregard for “best practices of corporate governance” at Disney. They highlighted multiple descriptions of how Eisner was an imperialist who did not consult the board enough, and how board members failed to do their jobs confronting Eisner. A notable example comes from the new revelation (through cross-examinations) that Disney’s hiring committee did not even convene before Ovitz’s hiring was announced. Secondly, reporters emphasized how Ovitz was incompetent for the job he was hired to do. The media especially enjoyed covering the juicy details from plaintiffs’ experts’ testimonies, suggesting that Ovitz was a habitual liar and a conspicuous spender. Finally, reporters suggested that the mismatch and eventual breakup with Ovitz could have been anticipated and avoided. Ovitz himself testified that at the time of his hiring he thought that the “duty of care” applied only to hospitals.

Overall, the onslaught of information substantiated the market’s initial (predominantly negative) reaction. The themes highlighted by the media were not new per se. The public knew the main plotlines – the bad blood, Eisner’s power-
tripping, and Ovitz’s powerlessness – before litigation even started. Still, the litigation process added lots of small details and filled in the blank parts of the story. Most importantly, even when litigation did not produce new information, it nevertheless raised the saliency and removed uncertainty from existing information. Litigation kept the Disney–Ovitz story in the news cycle, recalling the public’s attention to it. And it made certain versions of the story more credible and less refutable by giving the public access to direct quotes and internal memos from Disney insiders.

The Disney case study thus illustrates how the informational role of litigation is not limited to the final outcomes (that is, not limited to verdicts or settlement announcements). To the extent that the legal system had something to add to market players’ assessments of Disney, the additions came largely from the process rather than the verdict. As an anecdote: in Michael Ovitz’s Wikipedia webpage the description of the Disney debacle relies not on quotes from the 2005 verdict, but rather on a 2004 media story covering the depositions. To me, this anecdote indicates how the process itself often makes a lasting reputational impact, regardless of the verdict.

Recognizing the important informational role of the process also pushes us to rethink the role of verdicts. Judges base their interpretations on information gleaned from discovery, testimonies, and experts’ reports. In cases with big-firm defendants, such as Disney, the same information that the judge relies upon often gets diffused immediately. By the time the judge releases her version, the public is already aware of the information contained in it. Verdicts in big cases thus fulfill a different informational role than previously assumed: they affect reputational sanctions not by

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96 The Wall Street Journal (supra note 91) summarized it nicely:
“The plotline of the Ovitz saga has been well known for years… [And so the role of the trial was to] animate, in great detail, the bad old days of Disney’s corporate governance… Thousands of depositions pages have been made public in the case… Embarrassing revelations have trickled out in court filings for months… The trial, plus interviews from depositions, provides an unusual behind-the-scenes peek….”

97 See Richard Morgan, The Two Mikes, The Deal.com, Oct. 18, 2004 (“The story might have ended there were it not for Milberg Weiss’ class action. But now, after years of languishing, the suit has a snowball of interest unimaginable when it was first filed”).

providing new information but rather by constructing and disseminating existing information. The next Section looks at the Disney opinion through such a prism.

2. The Real Impact of the Verdict

Now that we understand how the court of public opinion treated the Ovitz affair prior to the verdict, we can turn to analyze what difference the verdict really made. Rereading the decision along with the media coverage of it generates one immediate conclusion: the conventional view that sees the verdict as a reputational deathblow to everyone involved is misguided. Granted, Chancellor Chandler’s version contains some quotable caustic comments. But it also provides more nuanced and contextual explanations for the Ovitz debacle. Unlike the prevalent preexisting interpretations of what went wrong in Disney, the verdict attributes the bad outcome to rare external conditions rather than to deep-rooted disregard for market norms. And the Chancellor reserves his strongest criticisms for individuals who were already ousted from Disney, thus implicitly creating a separation between bad (ousted) individuals and a good company. As a result, to the extent that the verdict changed stakeholders’ beliefs, it probably pushed stakeholders into thinking more positively about the company and its incumbent management.

Emphasizing the Context. The Chancellor opens his version with an explanation of the hiring: why Disney’s board rushed to hire someone with no experience in running a large public company, and then on top of it signed an outrageous severance package provision. Here the verdict’s version differs from preexisting versions by putting more emphasis on the context. The Chancellor highlights from the outset (and then reiterates constantly\textsuperscript{99}) the “perfect storm” that pushed Disney into the Ovitz affair: Disney’s previous president died in a helicopter crash; Disney’s CEO (Eisner) suffered from a heart condition; and the company was in the midst of major expansions. Due to these unusual circumstances, the company desperately needed a new president to take the burden off the ailing Eisner in the immediate term and provide an insurance and succession plan for the long run. Targeting Ovitz as the quick-fix made sense at the time, since he was considered Hollywood’s number one

\textsuperscript{99} See Disney, at 699, 702, 762, 770, 771, 778.
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powerbroker. And promising Ovitz a hefty severance package was necessary in order to lure him from his previous lucrative position and away from Disney’s competitors who were courting him.

By making the context more salient, the verdict helps stakeholders to overcome biases that plague their reputational assessments. Most notably, the Chancellor opens his decision by explicitly warning the readers from hindsight bias: do not ask yourself whether the board’s decisions make sense to you now, he tells the reader; ask whether they made sense at the time they were taken. The Chancellor then provides the readers with tools to mitigate their hindsight bias: he extends the timeframe by spotlighting the events that preceded Ovitz’s hiring, and reminds the reader not to evaluate Disney’s management integrity according to 21st-century best practices (which were not relevant when the Ovitz affair occurred).

Most notably, the Chancellor emphasizes that Disney’s stock prices jumped through the roof when Ovitz’s hiring was announced. Amazingly enough, this important fact was largely missing from the preexisting accounts of the Ovitz affair in the media.

Emphasizing the context also mitigates the readers’ tendency to adopt causal explanations. Remember that the pre-verdict narratives were predominantly causal: if Disney hired an incompetent president only to cushion his way out after a year

\(\text{\textsuperscript{100}}\text{Id. at 701-2, 764-5.}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{101}}\text{Id. at 702. The verdict changed the media coverage’s tone dramatically. Prior to the verdict editorials explained Ovitz’s severance package as a blatant disregard of market norms. Following the verdict editorials explained the package as a reasonable business decision. See, e.g., The Happiest Board on Earth, L.A. Times, Aug. 11, 2005, B12 (“that kind of ‘downside protection’ was central to getting Ovitz to leave CAA for Disney, and it’s endemic to the Hollywood way of doing business”).}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{102}}\text{To emphasize: the facts that the Chancellor cites were not new. But by packaging the facts with a seal of approval from a Delaware judge, the Chancellor increased the likelihood that stakeholders would reevaluate their initial assessment. Indeed, the media coverage that never mentioned the “perfect storm” that explains Ovitz’s hiring prior to the verdict began emphasizing it after the verdict. See, e.g., Laura Holson, Ruling Upholds Disney’s Payment in Firing of Ovitz, N.Y. Times, Aug. 10, 2005, A1.}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{103}}\text{See Disney, at 698. The media echoed the call to beware of hindsight: Regulating Disney, Aug. 12, 2005, N.Y. Times, at A18; N. Y. Times, \textit{id}; Kathy Kristoff, Ovitz Ruling Is a Limited Win for Directors, L.A. Times, Aug. 10, C1.}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{104}}\text{See Disney, at 697.}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{105}}\text{Id., at 708 (Disney’s market capitalization increased by more than $1 billion upon announcement).}\)
with $140 million of shareholders’ money, then Disney’s decision-makers must lack any regard for shareholders’ interests, right? Wrong, says the Chancellor. No one in Disney set out to hurt shareholders. In fact, Disney decision-makers – along with the rest of the world, as the stock price reaction indicates – thought that they were creating shareholder value by hiring Ovitz.

Scolding for Honest and Transient Mistakes. After explaining the hiring, the Chancellor turns to explaining the firing. How come Ovitz performed miserably at Disney? Why was he not fired earlier? Most importantly, why was he not fired “for cause,” which could have saved the need to pay his severance package? Here, the Chancellor’s answers focus on “mismatch of cultures.” Ovitz and the incumbent managers wanted the experiment to work, the Chancellor tells us, but Ovitz simply experienced difficulties assimilating to Disney. Ovitz was flashy, conspicuous, and tried to “agent” his colleagues, while the corporate culture was more blue collar and no-nonsense. Corporate legal scholars viewed Chancellor’s vivid descriptions of the mismatch as humiliating the defendants. But such a view misses two important aspects of reputational sanctions: it ignores the baseline (how does the Chancellor’s version compare to preexisting ones?), and the distinction between individual- and organizational-level reputations.

Attributing the failure to unanticipated mismatches and misperceptions is relatively favorable to the company’s reputation. Remember that most preexisting versions talked about how Ovitz’s failure was well anticipated: Disney’s incumbent management hired an obviously incompetent guy, and then intentionally tripped that

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106 Footnote 87 supra.
107 See Disney, at 762 (“considerations of improper motive are no longer present in this case”).
108 This is another point that the media coverage ignored prior to the verdict and embraced after the verdict. See, e.g., Kim Christensen & Richard Verrier, Judge Rules in Favor of Disney in Ovitz Case but Criticizes Eisner, L.A. Times, Aug. 10, 2005, A1 (“Ovitz’s 1995 hiring was hailed at the time as a coup for Disney and Eisner... Ovitz was a near-mythical figure then, frequently dubbed Hollywood’s most powerful executive”).
109 Disney, at 713-4; L.A. Times, id (emphasizing the mismatch-in-cultures point).
110 See, e.g., Frankel, supra note 64, at 358 (“this description undermines Ovitz’s reputation more than any criticizing of his behavior would... He was the punished bad boy... [the Chancellor made Ovitz] look like an incredibly stupid man, who [was] inexperienced in the politics of corporate Hollywood.”).
Moreover, according to the preexisting versions Ovitz was not fired for cause simply because Eisner wanted to protect his personal reputation at the expense of shareholder interests, or, worse, because Eisner and Ovitz cynically plotted to transfer millions from shareholders’ pockets to Ovitz’s. The Chancellor rejects these versions: Ovitz actually made some positive contributions to the company, he tells us, and neither side was intentionally tripping or foreseeing the failure. At one point the Chancellor describes in detail a seemingly irrelevant tidbit: a company meeting where all the top executives rode the company bus, while Ovitz insisted on being chauffeured in his private limo. Legal scholars viewed the inclusion of such a gossipy story as tarnishing Ovitz’s reputation. Well, maybe. But how does such a story affect the company’s reputation? For stakeholders thinking about whether to interact with Disney in the future, framing the debacle as a story about one greedy executive who did not fit in with the rest of the down-to-earth managers (and was subsequently fired) is not alarming; rather, it is assuring.

To answer the “scolding for what” question: the Chancellor is scolding Disney and its directors not for calculated disregard for shareholder interests, but rather for honest, temporary mistakes. Prior to the verdict, market and social arbiters framed the Ovitz debacle as a clear-cut story of corporate villains: managers becoming too entrenched and greedy, losing regard for shareholder interests or societal norms. The verdict, however critical of Disney’s directors, tells a markedly different story: a story about making mistakes while pursuing shareholder value.

Scolding Individuals Who Were Already Ousted. Up to now I have focused on how the verdict generates a more nuanced and favorable version. But there are
specific parts in the verdict that cannot be viewed as favorable to the defendants’ reputation. The Chancellor scolded Eisner for disregarding corporate governance, and scolded other top executives for not stepping up and raising red flags. His judicial scolding was done in such a catchable manner and came from such a credible source, that it captured front-pages of major newspapers, increasing public awareness and recalling attention to the defendants’ flaws. But while the reputation-damaging effects of these comments were widely recognized, one aspect of them has been grossly overlooked: the identity of the targets.

The Chancellor reserves his strongest criticism for six individuals. He lays most of the blame at Eisner’s feet, and then names three directors who should have done more to prevent the debacle: Irwin Russell – who did not negotiate hard enough on behalf of the company, and two members of the compensation committee – Ignacio Lozano and Sidney Poitier – for not being involved enough. The Chancellor also scolds two non-directors: Sandy Litvack, the general counsel, for not informing the board on the possibility to avoid paying Ovitz his severance package; and Graef Crystal, an outside expert hired to help the compensation committee, for providing a faulty and incomplete report. All these six scolded businessmen have one thing in common: none of them were any longer an integral part of Disney when the verdict was issued. The Disney 2005 board contained many directors who were part of the company in the Ovitz debacle days. Yet none of the retained individuals were scolded. The scolding was reserved for individuals who were already ousted or on their way out.

The Disney verdict thus illustrates how singling out individuals as sinners may

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117 One sentence made it to the pantheon of judicial scolding and was cited endlessly, describing how Eisner “enthroned himself as the omnipotent and infallible monarch of his personal Magic Kingdom” (Disney, at 763).
118 Id. at 760 (Eisner was the “instigator and mastermind” behind the hiring), 763 n. 488 (Eisner was imperial and Machiavellian, surrounding himself with yes-men). Every major newspaper’s front-page story about the verdict contained a sentence explicitly mentioning that Chandler saved his strongest criticisms for Eisner.
119 Id. at 763, 764.
120 Id. at 766-7, 771.
121 Id. at 777.
122 Id. at 770.
actually help the company. Indeed, the media quickly picked up the scapegoating theme promoted by the verdict. The coverage of the verdict highlighted a contrast: a victory to Disney and its board, and a blow to Eisner’s scorecard on his way out of the company. More generally, the verdict’s singling out of ousted individuals contributed to the company’s ability to convince stakeholders that the company had learned from its past and changed its ways. The media and institutional investors bought into the recovery message, presenting Disney as the perfect example of a corporate governance turnaround: the bad company of the 1990s turned into the role model of the 2000s.

Aside from illustrating how the scolding of individuals does not necessarily translate into reputational damages to the company, Disney also generates a much more counterintuitive observation: judicial comments do not automatically translate into reputational damages to the individual either. The reputational outcomes to the individual depend, again, on the baseline and the type of sin that the individual is scolded for.

To illustrate, let us consider Chancellor Chandler’s treatment of Ovitz. The baseline – the pre-verdict reputational capital of Ovitz – was close to zero. When legal scholars claim that the verdict humiliated Ovitz by presenting him as a powerless whipping boy, they ignore the fact that these depictions were already publicly available and widely accepted in the court of public opinion. The verdict

123 See the L.A. Times front-page headline: Judge Rules in Favor of Disney in Ovitz Case but Criticizes Eisner (supra note 108); Rupert Steiner, Record Profits Put the Smile Back at Disney, Sunday Bus., Aug. 14, 2005, at C9 (the verdict was “good news” for Disney, while “hardly a valediction for [Eisner’s] leaving card”). The fact that the sinner – Eisner – was on his way out was highlighted in media coverage. See, e.g., N. Y. Times, supra note 102 (referring to Eisner as the “departing” CEO that steps down soon); L.A. Times, id.


125 See, e.g., Frankel, supra note 64.

126 See footnote 89 supra; Dominick Dunne, Sorcerer’s Apprentice, Vanity Fair, Feb. 2005 (“Ovitz is probably the most humiliated Hollywood figure of the last decade”); Eric Dezenhall, Nail
could not have reduced Ovitz’s already deflated reputational capital by much (if at all). In fact, the Chancellor’s narrative resembles (and thus lends credence to) the narrative that Ovitz himself promoted in an attempt to recover his lost reputation.\textsuperscript{127} Unsurprisingly so: it is better for Ovitz to be perceived as powerless or incompetent in a given task than as someone who cynically disregards shareholder interest or is inherently useless. As one Wall Street Journal columnist quipped: “if Mr. Ovitz does not come out smelling like a rose, he at least gets some of his reputation back.”\textsuperscript{128} 

Overall, the Disney litigation illustrates how judicial comments do not automatically translate into an increase in reputational sanctions. To the extent that the verdict impacted stakeholders’ beliefs, it probably convinced them that Disney’s problems are less deep-rooted and more easily fixable than they previously thought. This is not to suggest that the litigation was all fun and games for the defendants. In fact, it was probably a nightmare for them. After all, they were dragged through discovery and cross-examinations, and some of them were publicly scorned by the judge. But remember that from a reputational perspective, Disney and its managers took a lot of criticism for the Ovitz debacle prior to the verdict. Once the verdict got out, it actually silenced some critics by giving a more nuanced and contextual version, allowing the company to turn over a new leaf. And the parts of the verdict that fueled new criticism were directed at individuals who were no longer part of the incumbent management.\textsuperscript{129} 

\textsuperscript{127} Em! (1999), in Chap. 9; Wall St. J., supra note 95 (“[Ovitz] seemed intent on using the witness stand as a platform to repair a reputation that has taken a beating since he left Disney.”).

\textsuperscript{128} Compare Ovitz’s biography (supra note 89, at 328) and his testimony (as covered by Wall St. J., id), with Disney, at 716.

\textsuperscript{129} The Chancellor’s interpretation bears similarity to the way in which companies typically explain their own misconduct: attributing the problem to external and uncontrollable conditions, or to rogue elements that were purged. See Andrea M. Sjoval & Andrew C. Talk, From Actions to Impressions: Cognitive Attribution Theory and the Formation of Corporate Reputation, 7 Corp. Rep. Rev. 269, 271 (2004).
Lost in Translation: Additional Comments on Information Flows

The Disney case study offers many insights about how information from courtrooms flows into the market, beyond the big-picture lessons we have covered thus far. This Section elaborates on two extra takeaway points: how different types of intermediaries cover verdicts differently, and how companies try to control information flow.

Different Types of Intermediaries Cover Verdicts Differently. Information from the courtroom does not simply fall on stakeholders like manna from the sky. Information flows through intermediaries who select what parts to highlight and then add their own take. Three types of intermediaries play an especially important role in transmitting information from corporate litigation: business media, “regular” media, and law firms. Analyzing the coverage of Disney suggests that each type of intermediary chooses to highlight different aspects of the verdict.

Media coverage differed from law firms’ memos by putting more emphasis on judicial comments and less on legal doctrines. The Chancellor’s vivid descriptions of how things happened featured prominently in newspaper coverage, but not in law firms’ memos. The law firms took an all-rules approach in their memos to their clients. They emphasized what the decision means for directors facing a similar hiring/firing decision (that is, what decision-process future directors need to adopt in order to avoid legal liability). Even among media outlets there were clear differences in the tone and scope of coverage. The business media’s coverage was more favorable to Disney than regular media’s coverage. Business newspapers painted the verdict as delivering a victory for Disney and its directors, and associated the bad parts of the verdict (caustic criticisms) almost solely with the retiring Eisner. The

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131 See, e.g., the titular claim of Christopher Parkes, Eisner’s Disney Reign Cut Down in Court: Although the Outgoing Chief Executive Was Not Found Guilty of Fiduciary Neglect, His ‘Machiavellian’ and ‘Imperial Management Style’ Was Put Under the Spotlight, Financial Times, Aug. 15, 2005.
regular newspapers, by contrast, painted the verdict as delivering crushing criticism to everyone involved.\footnote{132}{Compare the opening sentences in the front-page stories of L.A. Times, Wash. Post and N.Y. Times (\textit{supra} notes 102, 108, 116), \textit{with} those of Wall St. J. and Financial Times (\textit{supra} note 126).}

Such variation in the coverage of verdicts translates into variation in reputational outcomes. \textit{The reputational outcome depends on who the target audience is, and what intermediary is being tapped for information by the audience.} Roughly speaking, the reputational outcomes for Disney were zero for audiences relying on law firms’ coverage; negative for audiences relying on regular newspapers; and mixed (or even positive) for audiences relying on business newspapers.\footnote{133}{The Reputation literature suggests that media coverage makes stakeholders change their attitudes towards a company only when the coverage is predominantly negative; a mixed coverage does not increase reputational sanctions. Rebecca Reuber & Eileen Fischer, \textit{Organizations Behaving Badly: When are Discreditable Actions Likely to Damage Organizational Reputation?}, 93 J. Bus. Ethics 39, 45-6 (2010). The Disney verdict coverage contained some unfavorable quotes but also some favorable themes and was overall mixed.} Future analyses of the reputational impact of litigation should thus acknowledge that reputation is multifaceted and distinguish between different types of audiences.\footnote{134}{Any analysis of reputational impact should ask “reputation to whom”? “For what”? Companies and businessmen may exit litigation with a stellar reputation among one group of stakeholders but a tarnished reputation among another.}

\textit{Companies Affect the Information Flows from the Courtroom.} The verdict was not the only newsworthy event affecting Disney’s reputation at the time. Disney actually timed the issuance of a quarterly report to the exact day of the verdict’s release, announcing strong earnings growth.\footnote{135}{\textit{See http://thewaltdisneycompany.com/sites/default/files/press-releases/pdfs/2005-08-09%20Earnings.pdf.}} The company’s seemingly unrelated press release drew some of the media’s attention away from the verdict. The positive announcements got comingled and presented together with the verdict as a “good day overall for Disney.”\footnote{136}{\textit{See Sunday Bus., footnote 123 supra (“hours after [Chandler’s] ruling all eyes from Wall Street were on the media group’s stellar third-quarter results”); Kate Kelly, \textit{Disney Earnings Jump on Gains from TV Division}, Wall St. J., Aug. 10, 2005, at A3 (“Disney’s upbeat earnings announcement came on the heels of another victory for the company: a Delaware judge’s ruling that Disney’s directors didn’t breach their fiduciary duty…”).}

This previously overlooked fact represents another important lesson that can be generalized: \textit{reputational sanctions are not a one-sided event.} Much like legal
control, reputational control is a function of ongoing interactions where the regulated parties try to affect the regulators.\textsuperscript{137} Companies try to distort the flow of unfavorable information before it reaches the court of public opinion. Any discussion of the informational role of the law should therefore consider the conditions that make information flows more (or less) likely to get hijacked by companies. I conjecture that companies control the information flows from verdicts better than they control information flows from continuous discovery or trial processes. Verdicts are one-time, isolated events. And so companies can more easily produce a timely smokescreen: issuing an unrelated press release to steer media attention away from the verdict.\textsuperscript{138}

C. How Generalizable Are the Lessons from Disney?

Some may claim that we cannot extract general lessons from Disney, because the case is so singular: no other corporate dispute would similarly capture the public’s attention. My response to this argument is twofold. Firstly, remember that I use Disney to make a point about the state of current literature. Corporate legal scholars use Disney as a paradigmatic example of the saints and sinners approach, and so it makes sense for me to attack them on their own terms. By showing that even this supposedly clear-cut case does not behave according to the existing theory’s predictions, I illustrate the need to adopt an alternative framework.\textsuperscript{139} The saints and sinners’ proponents claim that litigation ramps up nonlegal sanctions especially in big-firm defendant cases.\textsuperscript{140} But it is exactly in these big and visible cases that the

\textsuperscript{137} The “New Governance” scholars emphasized this point for legal control (see Yuval Feldman & Orly Lobel, \textit{The Incentives Matrix: The Comparative Effectiveness of Rewards, Liabilities, Duties, and Protections for Reporting Illegality}, 88 Texas L. Rev. 1151, 1174 (2010)); it is time we flesh it out for reputational control as well.

\textsuperscript{138} An emerging literature in finance fleshes out the different ways in which firms try to control the information flow of bad news to the market: bundling bad news with good news, releasing bad news at times when investor attention is distracted, etc. See, e.g., Lauren Cohen et al., \textit{Playing Favorites: How Firms Prevent the Revelation of Bad News}, 22 (Harv. Bus. Sch. Working Paper No. 14-021, 2013), available at http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/14-021_d63679f9-4437-48b6-9073-ed41ba2ef9f5.pdf.

\textsuperscript{139} On the value in using qualitative case studies to illuminate problems in existing theories and develop alternative hypotheses, see Harry Eckstein, \textit{Case Study and Theory in Political Science in Case Study Method} 80 (2009).

\textsuperscript{140} See Frankel, \textit{supra} note 64, at 376.
reputational dynamics flip sides: the verdict does not play a role of informing market players about the bad corporate sinners, if only because the market has already learned about the misconduct and painted the company/businessmen as sinners. It is actually in the less visible cases of corporate misconduct that litigation stands to ramp up market sanctions, by reducing the detection costs. Future analyses of the indirect deterrence role of corporate law should consider the preexisting nonlegal sanction (which is a function of the type of company and the misconduct involved).

Secondly and more fundamentally, Disney’s uniqueness is a matter of degree, not substance. Recent empirical studies showed that nowadays most corporate misconduct is being revealed and punished by the market before litigation ensues. Even though other legal disputes are not as extensively debated in mass media as Disney, they are nevertheless tried in the court of public opinion with the legal system relegated to a second-opinion role. To illustrate how the Disney dynamics exist in other cases, consider another iconic corporate law case: Caremark.

The bad news that ignited the Caremark litigation was the company’s failure to comply with healthcare regulations, specifically by paying “kickbacks” to physicians. Shareholders sued Caremark’s directors for breaching their fiduciary duty in not monitoring and stopping the illegalities. Like the Disney decision, Chancellor Allen’s decision in Caremark was seen by corporate legal scholars as a “saints and sinners” maneuver: avoiding legal sanctions while generating nonlegal sanctions. But, much like in Disney, a deeper analysis of the Caremark saga reveals the same dynamics that resist the saints and sinners assumptions. Firstly, the judicial opinion does not contain new information. By the time Chancellor Allen released his version, Caremark’s stakeholders had already formed opinions about the kickbacks debacle and what it meant. The existing information environment was

141 Footnote 28 supra.
143 See, e.g., Mae Kuykendall, Producing Corporate Text: Courtrooms, Conference Rooms, and Classroom, 55 N.Y. L. Sch. L. Rev. 593, 609 (2010) (suggesting that Caremark’s decision-makers paid “psychic costs” for serving as the poster children for law breaking).
molded by social arbiters (“a spate of negative press”\footnote{See John Kimelman, \textit{Caremark: Worst Case Looks Fine}, Wall St. J., Mar. 28, 1995.}); market arbiters (rating agencies lowering Caremark’s ratings\footnote{See Moody’s Cuts Rating on Caremark’s Notes, Wall St. J., Mar. 25, 1996.}); and regulators (after the company pled guilty to several criminal counts, the government released a “statement of facts” detailing Caremark’s violations\footnote{See Thomas M. Burton, \textit{Caremark Paid Physicians to Obtain Patients, Governments Documents Say}, Wall St. J., Jun. 19, 1995.}). Similarly to \textit{Disney}, the legal complaint was actually based on information gathered from preexisting media coverage.\footnote{See \textit{Caremark}, at 964.} Chancellor Allen’s decision thus did not affect what information was available but at most how available information was diffused. Again, the lesson is that analyses of big corporate legal disputes should adopt a second-opinion perspective, considering the baseline.

Secondly, in \textit{Caremark} too the Chancellor’s version is actually favorable to the company when compared with how market and social arbiters previously interpreted the events. Chancellor Allen spends most of his opinion emphasizing how Caremark’s problems resulted from rogue mid-level employees (who were subsequently fired), rather than from systematic breakdowns. And he describes in detail how Caremark’s directors were proactive in their efforts to stop the problem once they recognized it.\footnote{\textit{Id.} at 962-3, 971.} Here too, the Chancellor’s narrative comes close to something a company’s spokesperson would dictate: acknowledging a problem but isolating and localizing it, thereby assuring stakeholders that the likelihood of future debacles is low.

\textbf{PART IV: IMPLICATIONS: THE INDIRECT DETERRENCE FUNCTION OF DELAWARE CORPORATE LAW}

\textbf{A. How Key Doctrines Contribute to Information Production}

If we agree that reputation matters in the corporate world and that the legal system affects reputation, then we need to reevaluate legal institutions by factoring (inter alia) how they contribute to the production of high-quality information. The
need to reevaluate key features of corporate law along these lines is emphasized by the corporate legal scholarship conundrum: most scholars assume that the primary function of corporate litigation is deterrence, yet we have not yet fully developed answers on how to evaluate deterrence. Existing accounts often assume that deterrence can simply be measured through the outcomes of verdicts – through looking at the imposition of legal sanctions. The saints and sinners approach adds the angle of measuring deterrence also through the content of verdicts – through looking at indirect deterrence through moralistic comments. My analysis, by contrast, does not limit itself to the outcomes or content of verdicts. I propose to consider also indirect deterrence through information production (reputational sanctions), which occurs throughout the process. This shift in perspective – adopting the informational/reputational lens – offers unique insights into key procedural and substantial doctrines in Delaware corporate law.

1. Procedural Doctrines: Pleading Mechanisms and Settlements Approvals

The most basic implication from acknowledging the information-production role of litigation is that procedure matters. Most academic corporate-law analyses revolve around substantive doctrines. We debate endlessly the nuances of what standard of review applies to given sets of circumstances. But in reality procedural doctrines shape corporate behavior at least as much.

The Pleading Stage. Think for example about the “good faith” doctrine and its impact on corporate behavior. Countless analyses of the Disney litigation touted Chancellor Chandler’s treatment of the duty of good faith as holding the promise to revolutionize corporate law. From now on, scholars told us, the enforcement of fiduciary duties will be ratcheted up: Delaware courts will not confine themselves to sanctioning just extreme cases of conflicted interests (duty of loyalty) or recklessness (duty of care); they will instead use the flexible duty of good faith to scrutinize a much wider array of misgovernance, including over-deference to the CEO. In

150 Gordon, supra note 32, at 1489 n. 88.
retrospect, we know that the duty of good faith did not deliver on its presumed promise: courts still refrain from imposing sanctions on directors.\footnote{See Hill & McDonnell, \textit{supra} note 70, at 371-2 (recounting the rise and fall of the good faith doctrine as the great white hope of increased legal enforcement).} But it would be a mistake to suggest that the good faith notion did not make a difference for enforcement. Sure, good faith may not have altered the legal outcomes of Delaware litigation; but it did shape enforcement indirectly, through allowing for more relevant information production in the process of litigation.

Good faith is best seen not as a substantive doctrine but rather as a pleading mechanism.\footnote{See Hillary A. Sale, \textit{Good-Faith’s Procedure and Substance: In re Caremark International Inc., Derivative Litigation}, in \textit{The Iconic Cases of Corporate Law} 279 (Macey ed., 2008).} Following the enactment of DGCL §102(b)(7), most Delaware companies put in their charter an exculpatory provision shielding directors from claims of mismanagement. As a result, most lawsuits used to have trouble surviving motions to dismiss. Good faith then emerged as an antidote to the pleading gambit of defendants: when plaintiffs manage to frame their complaint in ways suggesting bad faith, they stand a chance of advancing to discovery. And once a case proceeds to discovery, the horses are out of the barn: it is in discovery where most reputation-relevant information is produced. Through discovery the legal system manages to tell market players things they do not already know about the company and businessmen. And so even though the threat of legal sanctions stays the same – most Delaware cases still settle and in the few that do not defendants win – the threat of reputational sanctions gets a boost from the liberal use of good faith to advance cases beyond the pleading stage.

The point here goes beyond the doctrine of good faith. A liberal use of pleading mechanisms in cases against big-firm defendants is crucial if a legal system wishes to produce reputation-relevant information. Delaware fits the bill nicely: it uses a lax standard of review when determining whether to impose legal sanctions, but a more stringent standard of review in the pleading stage. In other words, Delaware courts let big cases proceed to discovery and trial even when the odds that these complaints will ultimately win are slim. This is the essence of the famous doctrines such as
Zapata,\textsuperscript{153} which applies an enhanced standard of review to the special litigation committee conduct; or Kaplan,\textsuperscript{154} which makes the question of how much discovery to accord to plaintiffs a matter of court discretion. Delaware decisional law is therefore geared towards flushing out disputes: while courts usually defer to the business judgment of directors, they gladly interfere when directors use their judgment to stifle litigation.\textsuperscript{155}

The Settlement Stage. Another example of procedural mechanisms that affect corporate behavior (without being appreciated for doing so) comes from the body of practices and doctrines on how to treat settlements. The overwhelming majority of legal disputes settle, and so the reputational outcomes of litigation depend on what information emerges from settled cases. The quantity and quality of information production in settlements is a function of when the case was settled. If the courts allow cases to proceed beyond pleading and to discovery, reputation-relevant information may emerge even when the case is settled before trial.

The legal system also shapes the reputational outcomes of cases after they settle, through various channels. Most basically, the issue of settlements’ secrecy is paramount to information production: the parties have incentives to keep settlements secret, but the public may have an interest in openness. If litigation produces an informational public good, then secret settlements are a public bad.\textsuperscript{156}

Another issue concerns judicial approval of settlements. Because most corporate disputes are filed as class/derivative actions, most settlements are subject to judicial approval. As a result, Delaware judges get an opportunity to voice their opinion – give their own version of how things happened – even when the parties themselves

\textsuperscript{153} Footnote 8 supra.

\textsuperscript{154} Kaplan v. Wyatt, 499 A.2d 1184 (Del. 1988).

\textsuperscript{155} Delaware’s approach stands in contrast to that of other jurisdictions such as New York, which defer to special litigation committees. See William T. Allen et al., Commentaries and Cases on the Law of Business Organization 392 (4th ed. 2012). See also Kuykendall, supra note 143 (Delaware’s pleading standards contribute to the ability of judges to produce texts).

\textsuperscript{156} See Steven Shavell, The Fundamental Divergence between the Private and the Social Motive to Use the Legal System, 26 J. Legal Stud. 575, 605 (1997). To be sure, information production is just one factor to consider among many, and it is hard to assess all the ex ante effects of barring secret settlements. My purpose here is not to categorically advocate against secret settlements, but rather to introduce previously overlooked costs and benefits that should be taken into consideration.
have settled. Caremark is a case in point: Chancellor Allen developed legal doctrines and generated reputation-relevant information (evaluating the quality of internal checks and balances and directors’ conduct) even though he was merely approving a settlement in a derivative action. In general, when judges assess whether to approve settlements, they supposedly already incur the costs of gathering information about the dispute. This puts them in a position to provide valuable information to the market. One policy implication, then, is that we should encourage more detailed reasoning in judicial approvals of settlements.\footnote{Of course, there is a tradeoff here, with many other considerations. Gathering information in a preliminary stage with no adversarial conflict may be costly. The judge’s third-party assessment may thus be worthless. Compare Jonathan Macey & Geoffrey P. Miller, Judicial Review of Class Action Settlements, J. Legal Analysis 167, 182 (2009), with Barbara J. Rothstein & Thomas E. Willging, Managing Class Action Litigation: A Pocket Guide for Judges 10-15 (2nd ed. 2009).}

2. Substantive Review: How to Assess Director Liability and the Role of Indeterminacy

Should Director Liability Be Assessed Individually or Collectively? Corporate legal scholars deal endlessly with what the standard of review for directors’ behavior should be, but ignore the question of how to apply the analysis: whether to assess directors’ conduct one director at a time, or to look at the whole board collectively.\footnote{For a notable exception see Ibrahim, supra note 149.} Here again, Disney serves as a great case study. Perhaps the most important yet overlooked doctrinal development in Disney is the application of a director-by-director analysis, detailing and grading each individual’s behavior.\footnote{Chancellor Chandler’s choice to adopt an individual mode of analysis is rare in cases of the Disney kind, and can be explained by the reliance on the good faith notion and intentionality. Id. at 939-40, 959-69.} The switch from a collective to an individual mode of analysis carries potential legal implications that have been analyzed elsewhere,\footnote{Id.} but I want to focus rather on its reputational implications: how does mode of analysis affect information production?

At first glance, an individual mode of analysis is good for reputational deterrence, since it generates more credible reputation information. A judge who analyzes directors’ conduct individually helps market players to avoid a “clarity of responsibility” problem. Under a collective mode of analysis, individual directors
can hide behind the others in an attempt to limit the reputational harm. Under an individual mode of analysis, by contrast, market players who read the verdict (or the media’s coverage) get credible information on the specific quality and share of the blame for each director.

However, a deeper look reveals contrasting dynamics. An individual mode of analysis may actually be bad for reputational deterrence under certain circumstances. One example that we already touched on (as is evident in Disney) is the potential for “scapegoating” dynamics.\footnote{To be precise, Chancellor Chandler actually applied a hybrid approach in Disney: he analyzed the conduct of several directors individually and the rest of the board collectively. Not coincidentally, the directors who were targeted individually were the ones who were already out of the company. See Section III.B supra.} The individual mode of analysis may deflect attention away from more systematic problems at the company level, giving the media ready-made villains to feed the public. Moreover, directors will anticipate the possibility of being specifically named and compared to other colleagues, and this anticipation may perversely affect the board’s day-to-day dynamics ex ante – such as in hurting the collegial atmosphere or promoting paper trails and incentives not to know.

The issue of how to assess directors’ conduct is therefore much more important than we give it credit for. At the risk of making general predictions on such a complicated topic, I conjecture that switching to an individual-based mode of analysis (as in Disney) will be good for moral deterrence but bad for reputational deterrence. Director-by-director analysis allows for better social shaming or guilt-inducing, since it gives those who dispense sanctions a clearer picture of the blameworthiness of each individual. At the same time, an individual mode of analysis creates a sharp separation between individual- and organizational-level reputations, thereby diluting the power of reputational forces to control corporate behavior.\footnote{See Macey, supra note 32(reputational forces lose their power when individual reputations are separated from corporate reputations).}

The Role of Indeterminacy. A well-recognized feature of Delaware substantive review is the reliance on judge-made, open-ended standards that are applied in a highly case-specific manner. Many scholars and practitioners agree that such a
feature creates indeterminacy in Delaware corporate law, and the debate revolves around whether such indeterminacy is good or bad for overall welfare.\textsuperscript{163} Here again, the information-production perspective offers alternative (complementary rather than mutually exclusive) insights into a well-debated issue.

One previously overlooked aspect is that legal indeterminacy contributes to the accuracy of market sanctions. Firstly, indeterminacy increases the \textit{quantity} of information production through inducing more litigation. Scholars have previously argued that Delaware’s reliance on open-ended standards is bad, because such standards create indeterminacy, indeterminacy creates a lot of litigation, and a lot of litigation creates overdeterrence of market activities.\textsuperscript{164} But if litigation indeed generates a positive externality of credible reputation information, then litigation intensiveness is not necessarily a bad thing. In other words, intensive litigation does not necessarily create overall overdeterrence. Sure, intensive litigation may create legal overdeterrence, but at the same time it mitigates \textit{market} overdeterrence.

Secondly, reliance on open-ended standards also contributes to the \textit{quality} of information production through shaping the richness and relevancy of judges’ verdicts. When judges rely on flexible doctrines such as good faith they are relatively free to select the facts and create a version of the events that they deem most relevant.\textsuperscript{165} Moreover, an analysis that focuses on good faith notions emphasizes reputation-relevant distinctions such as whether directors’ misconduct was intentional, or whether the problems that directors should have monitored are deep-rooted.\textsuperscript{166}


\textsuperscript{165} Here again \textit{Disney} serves as a case in point: Chancellor Chandler’s reliance on good faith allowed him to convey a fact-intensive coherent narrative in a way that could not have happened had he couched the legal questions as concerning strictly loyalty or care. See Sean J. Griffith, \textit{Good Faith Business Judgment: A Theory of Rhetoric in Corporate Law Jurisprudence}, 55 Duke L. J. 1, 22-3 (2005).

\textsuperscript{166} See Hillary Sale’s analysis of the \textit{Caremark} case (\textit{supra} note 152, at 292) (on the issue of what standards apply to directors’ duty to identify red flags).
Shifting our focus from legal outcomes (direct deterrence) to nonlegal outcomes (indirect deterrence) necessitates a reevaluation of the endless debate on how the content of corporate law is determined – on whether state corporate law is a race to the top, to the bottom, or not a race at all.

Those who subscribe to a saints and sinners approach usually advocate against a race-to-the-bottom view. The main argument of the saints and sinners approach, after all, has a normative flavor: it calls for a shift of focus from how seldom legal sanctions are imposed to how many nonlegal sanctions are inflicted (through judicial sermons). Such a description of Delaware law is hard to reconcile with a race to the bottom: why should a race-to-the-bottom judge dress down and inflict nonlegal pain on incumbent managers? The infliction of nonlegal pain is seen in this version as proof that judges do not cater to managers.

I want to offer here an alternative perspective. While I agree that Delaware decisional law generates nonlegal sanctions, I think that the saints and sinners proponents miss a crucial distinction between perceived sanctions and real sanctions. When legal enforcement is done indirectly (through scolding), it becomes far less transparent than when it is done directly (through legal sanctions). The public can easily assess how much a $100 million fine hurts a company. But the public has a hard time assessing how much verbal scolding actually hurts a company/individual. The reliance on judicial scolding creates a wedge between perceived and real enforcement. This wedge, in turn, allows Delaware to be perceived (by the public and Washington) as tougher on corporate America than it actually is.

My argument starts from a general assertion: under certain plausible conditions, it makes sense for a captured regulator to scold his capturers (regulated entities) in

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167 See Fairfax, supra note 47, at 445 (“[saints and sinners] scholars argue that legal opinions obviate the need for legal sanctions because communities rely on the norms articulated by such opinions to regulate director conduct”).

168 To use Disney as illustration: a state that is racing to the bottom and is captured by corporate America could have thrown away the complaint at the motion to dismiss stage; or at least refrain from humiliating directors with caustic judicial commentary. See Macey, supra note 76, at 1134.
public. If Delaware judges do indeed cater to corporate America, then it is in the interests of both sides to be perceived as fighting each other. The emphasis here is on “perceived as.” If Delaware really fights and hurts corporate America, it risks losing incorporation fees. If, on the other hand, Delaware is perceived by the public as not fighting corporate America at all, it risks a political backlash and eventually getting overruled by Washington. To be perceived as enforcing without really enforcing, the enforcer has to adopt low-visibility favoritism: to treat managers favorably but not openly favorably. In other words, both the regulator and the regulated industry want to “make it look like a struggle.”

We all know what “make it look like a struggle” means, even if we are unfamiliar with the exact term. We have seen it played out in countless films or novels. The story is simple: our hero is captured by some bad guys. The guy who guards our hero, however, wants to let him escape. The problem is that the guard does not want the other bad guys to think of him as a traitor (in our terminology: as catering to the hero). As a result, the hero and the guard come to an agreement: “give me a black eye to make it look like a struggle”/“knock me out with a blow to the head”/“trash the room to make it look like a burglary.” You get the idea. And you probably also get the analogy: Delaware – or any other state trying to remain on top of a regulatory race – needs to find a method for being perceived by the public and Washington as delivering vicious blows to corporate America, while not really hurting companies. And judicial scolding makes for an effective low-visibility favoritism method, for several reasons.

First and foremost, scolding is salient to the public. As the Disney case study illustrates, mass media highlights caustic comments much more than it highlights the nuances of judicial decisions and legal doctrines. Scolding grabs headlines. The result is a public perception of Delaware judges being fed up with corporate America

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169 See Mark J. Roe, Delaware’s Competition, 117 Harv. L. Rev. 588 (2003) (Any state that wins the regulatory competition is subject to the risk of being overruled by Washington).
170 See multiple examples of the make-it-look-like-a-struggle trope in the online wiki page for tropes: [http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MakeItLookLikeAStruggle](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MakeItLookLikeAStruggle); phone interview with Shai Biderman, Professor in the Film and Television Dept. of TAU, May 21, 2013.
and going after the bad corporate villains. Such a public perception reduces the chances of political backlash, keeping Washington at bay and maintaining Delaware’s powers. However, what bystanders view as an all-out attack on corporate America is actually not that hurtful to those who are being attacked. Recall our discussion of typical scenarios where scolding is directed at already ousted individuals, or targets less reprehensible sins. Secondly, scathing commentary makes a good make-it-look-like-a-struggle tool because its damage is easily reversible. Scolding is a more flexible enforcement tool than legal sanctions because it has no precedential value. When judges respond to a wave of corporate scandals by imposing more liability, they somewhat constrain their future behavior by creating precedents. By contrast, when judges ratchet up (perceived) enforcement via caustic comments, they can easily reverse the enforcement intensity once the economy is better and public attention drifts away from corporate governance.\footnote{Cf. Griffith, supra note 165; Jones, supra note 74, at 500; Wilson, supra note 76, at 505-6.}

The point about reversibility also illustrates, more generally, why enforcement through scolding may be good for Delaware companies as a group. A given company or director that suffers uninsurable reputational damage probably hates judicial scolding (ex post). But ex ante, Delaware companies and businessmen as a group are better off with scolding than with legal liability, because scolding allows the enforcer not to commit to harsh responses down the road.\footnote{Cf. Kuykendall, supra note 143, at 599.} It makes favoritism more sustainable.

As with any other theory about Delaware’s motivations, it is hard to offer conclusive proof that Delaware judges intentionally pursue a make-it-look-like-a-struggle strategy. What I can offer in support of my hypothesis (aside from logic) is circumstantial evidence, such as the explanations that Delaware judges themselves give. For example, when Chancellor Chandler was asked whether his Disney decision proves that Delaware courts are too favorable to corporate defendants, he responded: “how come, then, I get attacked on all sides? ... maybe that’s the best
measure that I’m doing right.”¹⁷³ To me, such an answer indicates that even if Chandler does not intentionally try to make it look like a struggle, he is aware of the dynamics. Delaware judges understand that the best way to protect their unique reputation with the public/Washington is to give corporate America something to attack them for, and vice versa.¹⁷⁴

To clarify, I do not claim that make-it-look-like-a-struggle dynamics are necessarily bad for overall welfare. When the risk of market or regulatory overreaction looms large, a make-it-look-like-a-struggle strategy can actually increase overall welfare by mitigating the perverse consequences of populism.¹⁷⁵ My goal is rather to present a tool that the Delaware judiciary (or other regulators) can use to fend off threats to their reputations. I cannot predict with certainty whether Judges employ this tool cynically or public-spiritedly.¹⁷⁶ But we can nevertheless glean important insights from shifting our focus to the perception and visibility of enforcement methods. Most basically, we learn that recognizing a pattern of judicial scolding is not the same as proving a race-to-the-top theory. Judicial scolding may sometimes go hand in hand with a race-to-the-bottom theory (or a Delaware-Washington competition theory): by reducing the visibility of favoritism, scolding may help incumbent managers to extract more rents.

¹⁷⁴ Consciousness is not needed for make-it-look-like-a-struggle dynamics to be in play. Judges or regulators do not have to be fully aware of or able to verbalize the dynamics. They only have to act as if they recognize the dynamics. The strategy of appearing to be tougher than you truly are can survive as a crude decision rule, based on past experiences of the judges.
¹⁷⁵ Another positive effect of the make-it-look-like-a-struggle strategy is in limiting “reputational spillover effects.” The revelation of bad news about one company may cause stakeholders to lose trust in the whole industry or market. These cascading dynamics, caused by biases such as availability heuristics, are bad for the economy as a whole. And to the extent that Delaware manages to convey a message of keeping corporate America in check, it can restore some of the trust and avoid unnecessary punishing of good companies.
¹⁷⁶ To emphasize: I do not claim that Delaware judges act with Machiavellian intentions to slow down Washington (or reputational markets) by making it look like a struggle. It is plausible that Delaware judges employ scolding because they believe that the alternative – intervening and imposing legal sanctions – is too costly.
PART V: THE REPUTATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF SEC ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS

The current Part explores how SEC enforcement actions affect behavior not just through imposing fines but also through producing information. The effectiveness of SEC-settlement practices is currently at the center of a heated national debate.¹⁷⁷ This Part provides a fresh perspective on how to measure the effectiveness of SEC enforcement and evaluate the proper scope of judicial review of SEC actions.¹⁷⁸ Switching our focus from Delaware litigation to SEC investigations is not just timely and practical, but also theoretically interesting: it enriches our understanding of the reputational theory and illustrates its broad applicability. Most notably, we learn how regulatory enforcement actions generate different reputational dynamics than litigation.

I start by providing background on the current debate over the effectiveness of SEC settlements. I then offer my new perspective: shifting our focus from whether the SEC collects enough awards in settlement (it does) to whether SEC produces valuable information that facilitates market deterrence (it does not). I detail the ways in which SEC settlements underproduce information, and explain the reasons behind the information underproduction problem. I conclude by examining potential solutions and evaluating the proper scope of judicial review.

A. Judge Rakoff vs. SEC Settlement Practices: The Existing Debate

Most SEC enforcement actions follow a similar pattern: the SEC learns about an alleged misconduct, investigates the matter, and then brings actions (files a complaint) only to simultaneously announce a pre-negotiated settlement with the defendants.¹⁷⁹ The typical settlement contains a three-pronged obligation by the defendant company: paying a fine,¹⁸⁰ agreeing to an injunction barring similar misconduct in the future, and agreeing not to deny the allegations. In return, the SEC

¹⁷⁷ Footnote 185 infra.
¹⁷⁸ A Court of Appeal decision on the issue is expected shortly. See footnote 11 supra.
¹⁸⁰ “Fines” denote here any monetary remedy, including disgorgement orders.
terminates the action and allows the company not to admit the allegations. The agreement is then brought before a federal judge who signs it and turns it into a consent judgment (also known as a “consent decree”).

This long-standing practice of neither-admit-nor-deny settlements went unchecked for many years, until Judge Rakoff of the Southern District of New York started raising questions vocally. In a sequence of three notable opinions – Bank of America, Vitesse, and Citigroup – Judge Rakoff decried the practice in general and refused to sign specific consent pacts. Other judges quickly followed suit, sparking a trend of increased scrutiny of SEC settlements. In no time, SEC-settlement practices had become the center of national attention. A heated debate ensued over the effectiveness of SEC enforcement and the proper scope of judicial review.

Those who argue against current SEC-settlement practices (and consequently are in favor of enhanced judicial scrutiny) typically claim that the SEC plays favorites with big-firm defendants, allowing them to get off with small fines and not admitting wrongdoing. The SEC and opponents of enhanced judicial scrutiny counter with two types of arguments. First, they claim, there is nothing wrong with the amount of awards collected in settlements. When evaluating whether the collected amount makes sense, one needs to consider the alternative to settling: wasting limited resources on a costly litigation while risking not proving violations and collecting nothing. Second, the SEC claims, SEC settlements contribute to sanctioning and

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deterrence not just through imposing fines but also through producing information. The SEC announces settlements with a press release that details the allegations, thus putting market players on notice about how the defendants behaved. And since defendants are barred from denying the allegations, the SEC’s version goes uncontested and is considered reliable.

In this Article I focus only on the second type of arguments – evaluating whether SEC settlements do indeed inform market participants about wrongdoing. I leave aside the first type of arguments not only because of scope but also because I think that there is no real reason to question the SEC’s official line. The SEC has incentives to maximize the amounts it collects even without judicial scrutiny, because this is how the SEC’s monitors – in the press, Congress, or academia – measure its success. Take the Citigroup case as an example. The absolute maximum that the SEC could have collected had it fought and won a trial is $320 million; the amount that the SEC got in settlement was $285 million. The SEC did not leave money on the table with Citigroup. It rarely does. Moreover, federal judges are not well positioned to decide questions such as whether to settle and for how much: such decisions require not only factoring the particulars of the case at hand but also prioritizing the budgetary constraints and caseload pressures of the agency. On the other hand, we have plenty of reasons to question the SEC’s claim that its settlements provide useful information. They do not. The next Section explains why.

B. Identifying the Problem: How SEC Settlements Underproduce Information

The SEC’s argument about the informative value of settlements misses an
important distinction between the quantity and quality of information. More information does not necessarily translate into a better information environment. The SEC is right to suggest that its settlements produce more information than other settlements – as is manifested in summarizing the allegations in press releases and making detailed complaints available. But the information that the SEC typically releases is not reputation-relevant. It does not help market players distinguish between good and bad actors. In order for SEC settlements to impact market players’ beliefs and facilitate better reputational sanctioning, they have to provide new facts or credible interpretations. The typical SEC settlement fails to do that, for several reasons.

Firstly, putting the public on notice is helpful only if the public has not already noticed the wrongdoing. When the wrongdoing is done on a large scale and by visible companies, the media usually covers it long before the SEC releases information. In the Bank of America settlement announcement, for example, every piece of information was stale. The informative value of putting the public on notice thus depends on the baseline. The notice has an informative value in actions against small broker-dealers, where but for the SEC announcement the violation would not have been noticed. Conversely, notice by itself has little informative value in settlements of the Bank of America and Citigroup kind, where the public had already noticed that something wrong had happened, and the role of the SEC was to focus on explaining how exactly things went wrong: what specific control weaknesses led to the wrongdoing? Was it really just a low-level rogue employee or a more pervasive problem?

Secondly, the reputational impact of settlement announcements is further diluted

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194 See Karpoff et al., supra note 28, at 15.
by the SEC’s tendency to target whole industries.¹⁹⁶ Announcing that company X allegedly engaged in wrongdoing does not really help market players if all company X’s competitors face similar allegations. Stakeholders cannot take their business elsewhere – cannot dispense reputational sanctions – unless the SEC provides details that distinguish between one alleged wrongdoing and another: which are attributed to technical errors and which reflect more deep-seated issues.¹⁹⁷

Thirdly, the SEC often lets defendants shape the content of announcements. Most of the settlements are pre-negotiated, and the SEC lets big-firm defendants minimize the reputational impact in two ways.¹⁹⁸ The simultaneous announcement of complaint and settlement limits the negative publicity exposure to only one event. And, more importantly, the pre-negotiation allows defendants to shape the public perception of the SEC’s allegations by affecting the language of SEC announcements. The Citigroup case illustrates how the SEC’s public version is watered down compared to the SEC’s internal version. In Citigroup, the same misconduct (material statement) led to two complaints: one against the company, and one against an employee (Brian Stoker). Yet for some reason the language used to describe the misconduct was different. The complaint against the company emphasizes that no bad intentions were involved, while the Stoker complaint does indicate intentionality.¹⁹⁹ The complaint against Stoker mentions the gross revenues collected by Citigroup in the toxic transaction, while the complaint against Citigroup uses only the less damning net-profits figure. Both aspects – the degree of intentionality involved and harm done – are important determinants of reputational sanctions. The framing of the Citigroup complaint therefore limited the reputational damages to the company.

Finally, the SEC argues that settlement announcements are informative even

¹⁹⁶ See Macey, supra note 32, at 225, 236.
¹⁹⁷ Id. at 23-4; Johnson, supra note 191, at 674; Jesse Eisinger, Needed: A Cure for a Severe Case of Trialophobia, ProPublica, Dec. 14, 2011 (“[the announcement] … renders the settlement little more than turning on the light in a kitchen full of roaches … the settlements merely show how the bad actors are scattered everywhere.”).
¹⁹⁸ See Johnson, id. at 665; Dreilinger, supra note 184, at 12-13.
¹⁹⁹ See Brief of Amicus Curiae former SEC Chairman Harvey Pitt in SEC v. Citigroup, at 26.
without containing admissions, simply because defendants are barred from denying the allegations. But in reality the “no denial” requirement is not (and perhaps cannot be) enforced. The information contained in the SEC allegations is open to interpretation and disagreement, if only because companies find ways to implicitly contest the allegations. Indeed, SEC Commissioner Luis Aguilar himself decried the common practice of “the press release issued by a defendant after a settlement explaining how the conduct was really not that bad or that the regulator overreacted.” Other current and former securities regulators agree that there is no such thing as a “no-spin zone”: defendants find various ways to bypass the requirement.

The upshot is that SEC settlements with big companies underproduce relevant information. The next question is why. SEC investigations generate internally high-quality information on how things went wrong; so why does the SEC not publicly convey information in a comprehensible and thorough way? Why does the SEC leave information on the table in settlements? The following Section locates the roots of the information-underproduction problem in the reputational incentives of both parties to SEC settlements.

C. Explaining the Problem: Why the SEC Trades Information for Fines

Large publicly traded companies have incentives to pay slightly higher settlement awards as long as they can prevent unfavorable information about them from reaching the market. This is because negative information may generate reputational ramifications, which are more risky for large companies than legal sanctions. Emerging evidence suggests that the typical reputational sanction attached

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200 See Vitesse, supra note 183, at 308.
203 See Citigroup’s brief, at 6-7; Becker, supra note 188, at 1860-1.
to revealed misconduct dwarfs the equivalent legal sanction. Moreover, many types of legal sanctions are paid by insurance companies, while reputational damages are less easily insurable. Large companies therefore fear an uptick in reputational sanctions more than they fear an uptick in legal sanctions.

As for the SEC’s incentives, here the story gets more complicated. One could argue that the SEC decision-makers’ incentives are aligned with the public interest, and so whenever the SEC blocks information from getting to the market it is only because the benefits from settling early and for larger amounts outweigh the informational benefits. From that perspective information underproduction is not really a problem but rather a welfare-enhancing tradeoff. But such an argument misses how the incentives of agents work in a multitasking environment. When agents make tradeoffs between multiple tasks they tend to overemphasize the tasks that are being closely monitored by principals. The SEC’s constituencies – the general public and congressional overseers – evaluate the SEC mostly according to readily observable yardsticks such as the amount of fines collected or the number of cases brought. The public and Congress have difficulties in observing and attributing the indirect benefits from information production to the SEC. The logic of incentives therefore suggests that the SEC will prioritize the number of cases brought and the amount of fines collected. Indeed, the SEC’s own communications reflect such emphasis; and former SEC staffers acknowledged that the SEC tilts the fines/information tradeoff against providing information and to the detriment of the public interest.

Footnote 4 supra.


Supra note 189.


See Becker, supra note 188, at 1871; Brief of Amicus Curiae Securities Law Scholars in SEC v. Citigroup, at n. 15. Another reason for the SEC’s reluctance to reveal information in settlements or to litigate stems from the tension between the SEC’s two roles: preventing scandals ex ante and adjudicating scandals ex post. If the full picture of the scope and pervasiveness of the financial
The upshot is that even well-meaning SEC officials face reputational pressures to favor fines over information. The next Part sketches solutions to this information-underproduction problem.

D. Solving the Problem: Can Enhanced Judicial Scrutiny Help?

Armed with a fresh perspective on SEC settlements, we can revisit the timely question of the proper scope of judicial review. As a starting point, we should switch from arguing “for or against” SEC settlements to concentrating on what type of SEC settlements we want. The solution to current problems with SEC settlements is not more litigation, but rather better-designed settlements and prioritizing of cases. SEC settlements can and should provide market players with more credible information on how exactly companies misbehaved. And the SEC should prioritize differently among its enforcement cases – by concentrating resources on cases that produce big informational benefits (disputes with giant financial firms), even at the expense of amassing complaints and litigating against smaller firms or low-level employees.

Judicial review, however, is a very imperfect method for improving SEC settlements. Judges themselves are fallible and may interfere even when the SEC makes the right considerations. My point here is not to advocate for more judicial scrutiny, but rather for better judicial scrutiny. To the extent that the newfound enhanced judicial scrutiny is here to stay, we need to develop clear guidelines for its application. I offer two simple guidelines. First, judges should generally maintain deference to the SEC. Interference raises the costs of settlements and limits the range of mutually beneficial bargains between the regulator and the regulated entities. Second, the main trigger for judicial intervention in rare cases should be information production and not severity of fines. Judges should interfere whenever the settlement sector’s problems gets revealed, the SEC’s reputation as protector of markets may suffer greatly.

209 See Pitt, supra note 199, at n. 14 (for an agency that initiates hundreds of proceedings, settling most of them becomes a necessity).

210 Federal judges enjoy life tenure but they are not immune from seeking esteem, influence, or promotions. They too may advance their own reputation at the expense of overall welfare. See Fredrick Schauer, Incentives, Reputation, and the Inglorious Determinants of Judicial Behavior, 68 U. Cin. L. Rev. 615, 629-33 (2000).

211 See Dreilinger, supra note 184, at n. 33.
withholds quality information on a topic that is of wide interest to the market.\textsuperscript{212}

In fact, the SEC seems already to be trending in the right direction. In September 2013, it announced 23 neither-admit-nor-deny settlements with firms accused of short selling\textsuperscript{213}, and two days later a settlement where JPMorgan not only paid $200 million but also admitted wrongdoing.\textsuperscript{214} To me, these two announcements represent the right priorities going forward, based on the type of violations and the companies involved. The alleged violation in short-selling cases does not require intent, and the firms involved are not household names. By contrast, when a giant like JPMorgan is charged with misstating financial results and lacking internal controls, it becomes essential that the public gets credible detailed information on how things went wrong.

To borrow an analogy from Communication Science: the SEC needs to shift to a “burglar alarm” mode of reporting. In the past decade scholars have been advocating a shift from the traditional “all the news that’s fit to print” mode of journalism to a burglar-alarm approach.\textsuperscript{215} The idea is that nowadays, with the advancement of information technologies, citizens can easily access information on all issues. What citizens need is not more information but rather someone to sift the information for them: a reputable intermediary that will direct citizens’ scant attention to the few pieces of information that are more relevant and critical. The same can be said with regard to SEC settlements. Nowadays market players learn about financial misconduct from multiple sources. The SEC should therefore switch from merely putting us on notice that lots of bad things are happening to flagging the

\textsuperscript{212} The doctrinal hook for demanding more information production comes from the requirement to consider “the public interest” when reviewing SEC’s decisions. See SEC v. Randolph, 736 F. 2d 525 (1984). Note that any form of judicial scrutiny should consider the unintended consequences on parallel private litigation: before making settlements more informative one should consider limiting the issue preclusion and estoppel effects. Buell, supra note 193, at 100-1.


more problematic cases – providing detailed information on the most important cases and directing market players’ attention to instances where they greatly under- or overstated problems.

CONCLUSION

This Article makes one overarching point: corporate law shapes behavior not through imposing liability, but rather through producing information. In the course of fleshing out this point and examining the interactions between law and reputation, the Article contributes to various debates that have been at the center of academics’ and practitioners’ attention. In this Part I offer a brief synthesis of the Article’s contributions as they relate to existing literatures, before outlining future research.

First, the Article advances our understanding of how reputational forces work. The Article’s original contribution is not in telling us that reputation matters or that the law matters for reputation, but rather in exploring how the law matters for reputation. Specifically, the Article is the first to examine at length the reputation-shaping implications of information that is produced in the process of litigation or regulatory investigations. The existing literature tells us that on average litigation and regulatory investigations are bad for a defendant-company’s reputation; whereas I shed light on the cross-section: why some disputes do not hurt or even help the defendant-company’s reputation.

Second, the Article challenges the conventional assumption among Law and Social Norms scholars that the legal and reputational systems are independent of each other. The focus on interdependencies between formal and informal systems of control makes this Article closely related to several recent working papers that analyzed the informational role of the law. My approach differs from theirs along

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216 We already knew that: see Karpoff, supra note 4 (providing an overview of the extant empirical literature on the reputational outcomes of enforcement events).
217 Footnote 24 supra and accompanying text.
two dimensions: namely, by examining what gap in market knowledge the legal system is filling, and how it is filling the gap. Firstly, existing accounts assume that market players are not aware of corporate misconduct, and the role of the legal system is to reduce the detection costs of reputational sanctions. My account, by contrast, assumes (following recent empirical studies) that in disputes with big-firm defendants market players become aware of and react to misconduct before the legal system gets involved, and so the real role of the legal system is to produce second opinions on how things happened. Secondly, existing accounts focus on the informational role of legal outcomes, while I focus on information disseminated in the process of determining legal outcomes. Two SEC enforcement actions (or Delaware trials) with identical legal outcomes may generate completely different reputational outcomes.

Third and most basically, the Article revisits the debate over how corporate law matters. My approach is related to and complements the influential saints and sinners theory. Most notably, I develop the transmission-of-law point that Ed Rock and others have left for future research. That is, instead of describing just what Delaware judges say, I analyze what market players are actually hearing. Because most people do not read judicial opinions, the role of the media and other information intermediaries in selectively diffusing information from the courtroom becomes especially important. In the process of analyzing the content of media coverage, several insights stand out: the earlier stages of litigation impact the court of public opinion just as much as verdicts; verdicts do not necessarily hurt defendant-companies’ reputation; and moral rebukes often get lost in translation and do not

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219 See also Macey, supra note 32, at 12; Fairfax, supra note 47, at 443.
220 The reputational impact of litigation therefore depends on the type of misconduct and companies involved, and the identity of harmed parties. Cf. Skeel, supra note 44, at 1864.
221 See Iacobucci, supra note 218 (the size of legal sanctions affects the reputational signaling equilibrium by affecting firms’ initial decisions whether to commit wrongs or not); Baker & Choi, supra note 218 (firms can opt to submit themselves to formal sanctions and thus facilitate better informal control).
222 See Rock, supra note 2, at 1106.
223 On the gap in the literature regarding the corporate governance role of the media see Dyck & Zingales, supra note 61.
reach their presumed audiences. The upshot is that corporate law affects behavior mainly through shaping factual beliefs (information-producing role), rather than through shaping moral beliefs (finger-wagging role). To be sure, there are still finger-wagging elements in Delaware opinions, but the information-production elements are ultimately more important in today’s environment. The Article outlines specific factors that limit the impact of finger-wagging such as lack of verdicts, sanctions, and communication channels. And more generally, in an environment with diffused and atomistic participants and super-strong economic incentives it makes sense to highlight reputational rather than moral sanctions.

The fourth set of insights is normative: reevaluating the desirability of key corporate law institutions according to their contribution to information production. The main original contribution stems from refocusing the well-debated question of how to get better deterrence: whether to “leave things to the market” or “ramp up legal sanctioning.” Those who oppose legal intervention fail to recognize the importance of the legal system for the functioning of market deterrence, while those who advocate for more legal sanctions fail to recognize the ability of the legal system to contribute to deterrence indirectly, without interfering with business decisions. The most effective and realistic way to promote deterrence is not by increasing judicial intervention and legal sanctions, but rather by increasing the quantity and quality of information production. Consequently, the overlooked

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224 My heavy emphasis on the role of earlier stages of litigation corresponds with Gorga & Halberstam’s recent paper (supra note 23). The main distinction between our approaches is that they focus on the implications of information production on internal policing by the company insiders, while I focus on the implications for reputational policing by the company’s outside stakeholders.

225 The focus on belief-updating also separates my account from most Expressive Law theories, which highlight the preference-shaping role of the law. The line between belief- and preference-shaping is murky, however, as is evident from our discussion on how noninformative components in verdicts affect stakeholders’ beliefs through framing and salience. See DellaVigna & Gentzkow, supra note 18, at 656. Another way to describe the distinction is that existing papers tell us how courts provide information about what the market norms are, while I focus on how courts provide information about whether given norms were violated in specific instances (i.e., what the facts pertinent to norm-violation were).

226 See Iacobucci, supra note 218, at 8 (in large atomistic markets collective action problems usually make costly punishment measures – such as guilt or shaming – less viable than punishment that relies on self-interest – such as reputational sanctions).

227 See Fairfax, supra note 47, at 428-32.
procedural doctrines of pleading standards, settlement approvals, and openness of proceedings affect corporate behavior just as much as endlessly debated substantive doctrines. To clarify, I do not claim that we should necessarily lower the pleading standards or write lengthy judicial opinions when approving settlements. What I claim is that when making such decisions we should consider also the previously overlooked set of costs and benefits stemming from information production.

Another set of insights comes from applying the theory to the hotly debated SEC enforcement practices. By applying the insights of the Reputation literature I provide a fresh perspective on the claim that SEC settlements are informative. The main takeaway point is that SEC settlements do produce lots of information, but that they are not informative. The SEC does not fulfill its potential to facilitate market control: the information it produces does not help market players distinguish between high- and low-quality companies.

Finally, the Article contributes to our understanding of regulators’ behavior. The bulk of the Article focuses on how the actions of law enforcers (Delaware judges and SEC commissioners) affect the reputations of regulated entities. But enforcement actions also shape, and are shaped by, the reputations of the enforcers themselves. The existing literature has recognized that both Delaware and the SEC try to balance between catering to the general public and political overseers by being tough on corporate America, but not so tough as to alienate the regulated entities. My original contribution comes from explaining how exactly regulators engage in such a balancing act. I identify the tradeoffs that regulators face when choosing between enforcing directly (imposing sanctions) and enforcing indirectly (producing information). Both Delaware and the SEC seem to pick the method of enforcement that makes them look tough in the eyes of outsiders but is actually less hurtful to the regulated entities.228

To be sure, even with all these contributions the Article represents only a starting

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228 To recast the Disney example: existing accounts view Disney as a show trial meant to convince the public that Delaware got the burning issue of inflated executive pay under control. My contribution is in adding that “no incumbent managers were harmed during the filming of this show,” Delaware got the presumed mitigating-backlash benefit without really hurting Disney.
Considerations of scope and clarity dictated leaving several angles of this vast topic for future research. Specifically, future research should put more emphasis on the normative and empirical angles. For example, when I make here the descriptive claim here that fiduciary duty litigation produces reputation information, an important question remains as to whether litigation is the optimal way to enhance the accuracy of reputational sanctions. Social planners may think of more effective ways to produce credible information that do not involve costly litigation, such as granting stakeholders liberal access to inspection of company books and records. And while the case studies and examples that I explore are illuminating and interesting, future research should try to corroborate or discard the testable predictions of the reputational theory more systematically.229

I started this project with the motivation of researching how exactly reputation matters. Somewhere along the way, my emphasis changed: I was not just describing how corporate reputation works; I was describing how corporate law works. It became clear that information production as a by-product of litigation is in many cases the de facto primary function of corporate law. In other words, to understand how corporate law works we need to develop a reputational theory of the law.

229 For example, future research could test over a large sample of cases the following hypothesis: when the judge criticizes defendants for honest temporary mistakes, the reputational outcomes would be more favorable than in cases where the judge scolds defendants for calculated disregard. However, one should proceed with caution when measuring reputational outcomes with standard event-studies methods. Nowadays information about corporate misbehavior flows to the market constantly from multiple sources. As a result, researchers cannot designate neat event windows. The filing of a lawsuit is almost never the first time that market players hear about misbehavior by large companies. And the information contained in verdicts is usually stale, having already been leaked to the market during earlier stages. See footnote 29 supra.