Journalists' Social Identity:
The Case of Two Calgary Newspapers

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Abstract

When Postmedia bought Sun Media in 2014, it gained control of competing daily newspapers in Ottawa, Calgary, and Edmonton. Postmedia already owned the *Calgary Herald* and now controlled the *Calgary Sun*. The merger of the two newspapers' newsrooms provided an opportunity to analyze journalists' self-perceptions using Social Identity Theory. Journalists' identification with their pre-merger newspaper persisted after the newsroom merger, an allegiance that may dissipate over time. In the meantime, journalists adapted to this merger of newspaper rivals by identifying with one masthead over the other depending on who the journalist is talking to.

Keywords: Newspapers, newsroom, journalists, social identity theory, Postmedia

Résumé

L'identité sociale des journalistes : Le cas de deux journaux de Calgary

Lorsque Postmedia a acheté Sun Media en 2014, cette entreprise a pris le contrôle de quotidiens concurrents à Ottawa, Calgary et Edmonton. Postmedia possédait déjà le Calgary Herald et contrôlait désormais le Calgary Sun. La fusion des salles de rédaction des deux journaux a été l'occasion d'analyser les perceptions de soi des journalistes à l'aide de la théorie de l'identité sociale. L'identification des journalistes à leur journal avant la fusion a persisté après la fusion des salles de rédaction, une allégeance qui peut se dissiper avec le temps. Entre-temps, les journalistes se sont adaptés à cette fusion de journaux rivaux en s'identifiant à un titre plutôt qu'à un autre, en fonction de leur interlocuteur.

Mots-clés : Journaux, salle de rédaction, journalistes, théorie de l'identité sociale, Postmedia

When Postmedia merged the *Calgary Sun* and *Calgary Herald* newsrooms in mid-January 2016, an opportunity arose to explore how journalists processed their new *Sun-Herald* or *Herald-Sun* identity. Former rivals were now working together but strong allegiances to a masthead die hard. What follows is a study of the impact the newsroom merger had on the social identity of some of the newspapers' journalists. This article discusses conditions of the Canadian newspaper industry before brief histories of the *Herald* and *Sun* are provided to characterize the always-evolving Calgary newspaper market, highlighting the rivalry between the two newspapers, and identifying their perceived public brands. Social identity theory is introduced and its suitability for this project explained. Research questions that focus on the journalists' perceptions of each newspaper's brand pre- and post-merger, and how they self-identified post-merger, are introduced. Methodology is outlined, followed by a discussion of the results of in-depth interviews and conclusions. Postmedia's merger of the *Herald* and the *Sun* has evolved in phases: 1) separate newsrooms producing separate content for each masthead; 2) a merged newsroom but journalists still producing content for one newspaper; 3) journalists contributing content for

one newspaper and then the other, following the perceived style of each; 4) journalists producing the same content for both newspapers. Along the way, as this study shows that, by focusing on the third phase, *Herald* and *Sun* journalists learned to adapt to their unique situation, in effect creating a hybrid social identity.

CONTEXT

The Canadian Newspaper Industry

Consolidation of newspapers, cost-cutting, and seeking economies of scale have long been reactions to declining advertising and circulation revenues (Bagdikian, 1977; Lacy, 1987; Muehlfeld, Sahib & van Witteloostuijn, 2007). The economic conditions are no different for Canadian newspapers (Communications Management Inc., 2013, 2017; Compaine, 2000; Jackson, 1999; Lee, 2020; Lindgren & Corbett, 2021; Public Policy Forum, 2017; Winseck, 2018). Operating revenue for Canadian newspaper publishers fell nearly 22% from 2018 to 2020, continuing a downward trend exacerbated by COVID-19 (Statistics Canada, 2021). However, research also shows that major publicly-traded newspaper chains in the United States and Canada did not report declines in operating revenues despite major losses in revenue and profit from 2006 to 2013 (Edge, 2014b) and that, contrary to the dominant narrative, the number of journalists in Canada "in absolute terms" fluctuates but has been rising since 1987 (Wilkinson & Winseck, 2019, p. 389). Nevertheless, mergers or closures have been an aspect of the history of newspapers since at least the start of the twentieth century (McCombs, 1988; Sloan & Copeland, 2012).

A few corporations own most Canadian news outlets (Chandra & Collard-Wexler, 2009; Edge, 2018; Public Policy Forum, 2017; Royal Commission on Newspapers, 1981; Soderlund & Romanow, 2005; Winseck, 2002). Postmedia continued this trend in 2022 with its acquisition of newspapers from Brunswick News Inc., giving the nation's largest newspaper publisher greater reach in Eastern Canada (Financial Post Staff, 2022). This purchase reflects the notion that "local news publications can neither scale up nor scale down. What they can do is consolidate" (Public Policy Forum, 2022, para. 11). A major transaction by Postmedia in 2014 offers an opportunity to study a unique result: the merger of two newsrooms, or the forced amalgamation of journalists who were once fierce competitors (Tait, 2016). Generally, when a newspaper buys its competitor that newspaper is either shut down, folded into the surviving newspaper, or the two newspapers co-exist but cost-cutting may eventually dictate that only one newsroom is necessary (Kochersberger, 1990; Lisby, 1986). This final scenario may result in journalists retaining their allegiance to their original employer/newspaper while creating content for both newspapers. As the literature review will show, social identity theory is a good tool for understanding how journalists self-identified before and after a merger that retained mastheads of the former competitors. Journalists rely in part on the name recognition of their news outlet to open doors and instill confidence in possible sources that they are trusted professionals. One question driving this article is: how do journalists self-identify after their newspaper merged with its cross-town rival? One outcome from this research shows journalists are resourceful, turning what could be a confusing situation—Which newspaper do you represent?—into a perceived advantage: tell a source you represent the newspaper they are most likely to read. This tactic, however, also raises ethical questions about representation.

History

The *Calgary Herald, Mining and Ranche Advocate and General Advertiser*—today known simply as the *Calgary Herald*—was launched in 1883 by Thomas Braden and Andrew Armour ("A brief history," 2016; Lakritz, 2009). The Southam Company gained controlling interest in the *Herald* in 1908 ("What they think of J.J. Young," 1908). The *Herald* remained part of the Southam chain until the mid-1990s when Hollinger Inc. took control (Edge, 2018; Gill, 2017). Hollinger sold the former Southam newspapers to Canwest Global Communications for $3.2 billion in 2000, but Canwest declared bankruptcy nine years later (Edge, 2018; Goodhand, 2016).

Postmedia won Canwest's assets in 2010 with a $1.1 billion bid backed by GoldenTree Asset Management, FirstMark Capital and Silver Point Capital LP (Edge, 2017, 2018; Goodhand, 2016).

The precursors to the *Calgary Sun* are variously cited as the *Alberta Tribune,* launched in 1885 by Thomas Braden, "who was rebelling against the *Calgary Herald* he had helped to start" (Moore & Hill, 2015, para. 3), or the *Calgary Tribune*, launched by Braden in 1886 (Alberta on record, n.d.). The daily *Albertan* came into existence when the semi-weekly *Calgary Tribune* merged with another semi-weekly, the *Calgary Albertan*, in 1902 (Kesterton, 1967). The *Albertan* was purchased in 1926 by George M. Bell (Alberta on record, n.d.; Kesterton, 1967). Bell ran the newspaper until 1936 when his son, Gordon Bell, took over as publisher. Another son, Max Bell, purchased the *Albertan* from his father's estate in 1943 and would serve as publisher until 1972 (Alberta on record, n.d.).

Max Bell created Free Press (F.P.) Publications with Victor Sifton in 1959 (Kesterton, 1967). F.P. was consumed by Thomson Newspapers Ltd. in 1980 (The Thomson Corporation History, n.d.). Before the year was out, Thomson flipped the *Albertan* to the *Toronto Sun* (Creighton, 1993; Sonmor, 1993). Sonmor called the *Albertan* a "dull tabloid" (1993, p. 199), likely referring to the paper size rather than the titillating tabloids of London and New York City. Doug Creighton, a co-founder of the *Toronto Sun*, called the "old" *Albertan* a "morning business paper" that "was most definitely a tab produced by a broadsheet staff" (1993, p. 120). The last *Albertan* was published July 31, 1980, and the first *Calgary Sun* appeared Sunday, August 3, 1980 (Creighton, 1993; Sonmor, 1993).

The *Calgary Sun* replicated the *Toronto Sun*'s formula of championing "a right-wing, blue collar populism" (Public Policy Forum, 2017, p. 27), and featuring Page 3 "Sunshine Girls." Unlike the dull *Albertan*, the brash *Calgary Sun* would be striking "the lively tone that Calgarians, or at least the 55,000 who were soon buying the paper, were looking for" (Sonmor, 1993, p. 205). Its journalists relished challenging "the self-important" Southam-owned *Herald*, believed to be the top revenue-producing newspaper in Canada (Sonmor, 1993, p. 205). The Toronto Sun Corporation paid less than $1 million[1] for the *Albertan*; its metamorphosis into the *Calgary Sun* was profitable within four years of its 1980 launch (Creighton, 1993). Eventually the profitable *Sun* newspaper chain was sold to Quebecor in 1998 (Edge, 2016).

Postmedia Network Canada Corp. bought Sun Media from Quebecor Media Inc. in 2014, a transaction that included 175 English-language newspapers. The price was north of $300 million (Austen, 2104; Benedetti & Compton, 2015; Edge, 2014a; Timeline, 2016). Calgary's two most popular newspapers and long-time competitors were now owned by the same corporation. Then-CEO and president of Postmedia Paul Godfrey declared, "We intend to continue to operate the Sun Media major market dailies and their digital properties side by side with our existing properties in markets" (Postmedia, 2014, para. 4).

Although the purchase of Sun Media left three cities—Calgary, Edmonton, and Ottawa—with two daily newspapers owned by one company, Godfrey dismissed concerns of news consolidation by noting that Vancouver's two dailies, the *Province* and the *Sun*, had been published by Postmedia and previous owners for more than 30 years without pause. "Newspapers are not the chief competitors to each other now," claimed Godfrey (cited in Austen, 2014, para. 11), referring to competition with digital news outlets and search engines. However, as Edge (2018) noted, Postmedia's "debt situation has forced it to engage in some questionable business practices," including a 2017 deal with Torstar to trade 41 newspapers and close 36 of them (an exchange the Competition Bureau investigated but declined to act on [Government of Canada, 2021]), and merge "the newsrooms at its duopoly dailies in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Ottawa, despite promising not to upon acquiring several competing titles in its 2014 purchase of Sun Media" (p. 40).

Canada's Competition Bureau declined to challenge Postmedia's purchase of Sun Media, effectively approving the transaction in 2015 (Government of Canada, 2015a; Government of Canada, 2015b). Based on a five-month study, the Bureau said it would not challenge the deal because

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1   Currencies are in Canadian dollars unless otherwise noted.

the "transaction is unlikely to substantially lessen or prevent competition" (Government of Canada, 2015a, para. 1). The Bureau took Postmedia at its word "that it intends to continue to operate the *Sun* papers in Ottawa, Edmonton and Calgary side by side with its existing newspapers in those markets, including maintaining distinct editorial departments" (Government of Canada, 2015b, para. 1). The Bureau also said the *Sun* and *Herald* differed in their "emphasis, detail and tone of their content" (Government of Canada, 2015b, para. 16) and these daily newspapers were

> **...**not close rivals from the perspective of readers, a finding that was supported by the views of market participants and by an analysis of the demographic characteristics of the parties' respective audiences. In short, the parties' newspapers appeal to different types of readers and those readers do not tend to substitute between the parties. (para. 35)

On January 16, 2016, a little over 15 months after the purchase of Sun Media, Postmedia merged newsrooms in Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa, and Vancouver, resulting in the loss of 90 jobs, including 25 people at the *Herald* and *Sun* (Bradshaw, 2016). This "partial about-face" by Postmedia reflected revenue declines and dealing with more than $670 million in debt (Bradshaw, 2016, para. 4). Merging the newsrooms was not imagined when Postmedia bought the *Sun* newspapers, claimed Gerry Nott, a senior vice-president: "This was absolutely not the plan from the start. It was a plan formed on the basis of the realities we face every day" (as cited in *Financial Post*, 2016, para. 8).

A Competition Bureau spokesperson said "while we expect the parties to honour their public commitments," separate newsrooms was not a major factor when Postmedia's acquisition was uncontested compared to factors "such as a lack of close rivalry between the broadsheets and tabloids, ongoing competition from free dailies and growing pressure from digital alternatives" (as cited in Bradshaw, 2016, para. 18). The newsroom mergers were criticized as another example of increasing media concentration in Canada. "Centralized news-gathering and opinions, including in local news,

do not add to the national debate that helps build a functioning democracy," said Jerry Dias, national president of Unifor, which represented some of the laid off employees (as cited in Bradshaw, 2016, para. 11). However, as Edge noted, "The merger of newsrooms was ironically met with considerably more outrage than the Competition Bureau's 2015 approval of Postmedia's acquisition of Sun Media" (2016, p. 72).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory explores the phenomenon of individuals whose identity is partly linked to belonging to a group, or "social categories" (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 250). According to Ashforth and Mael, "the individual defines him- or herself partly in terms of salient group memberships" (1989, p. 34). The person identifies with a group and part of that identity is connected to acknowledgement of another group, possibly a competitor (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 34). This participation may not be intense while the individual believes she or he is "psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Indeed, the person may be proud of what the group supposedly stands for— "cheeky" journalism versus "boring" journalism— and yet not even be friendly with fellow group members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 26). In this article, social identity theory will help illuminate journalists' sense of self and, to a degree, the tenor of their newsroom, as former competitors learned to work with each other while producing material for two Calgary newspapers.

Russo suggests journalists' embrace of a public service role is one of two interrelated characteristics of their professional identity, the other being identification with the organization that helps make that mission possible (1998). A survey of journalists at a U.S. newspaper showed a "higher identification with the profession of journalism than with their newspaper, although levels reported for both targets were high" (Russo, 1998, p. 87). Interviews also revealed a strong commitment among journalists to their

colleagues and the audience, a team-like mentality with a shared mission of informing the public (Russo, 1998). Kriess, however, argues there is a disconnect between journalists' self-image—truth seekers determined to inform the public—and the different publics' images of journalists (2019). "In sum, journalists are highly educated, urban, and cosmopolitan elites when compared with the publics they serve" (Kriess, 2019, p. 28). Usher (2015) suggests journalists' social identity is also linked to the culturally significant space in which they work, or, in the case of the *Miami Herald*, where they no longer toiled: the newspaper moved in 2013 from its iconic downtown property to a light-industrial suburb 12 miles away. Moving a newsroom "has significant influence on journalists' sense of how news gets made and produced" (Usher, 2015, p. 1007).

Creating a newsroom culture is key to helping new working conditions stick (Gade, 2004). Changes in a newsroom's structure may lead to low morale, causing journalists to reconsider "some fundamental principles of their work: their sense of news, audience, organization, and even the purpose of journalism" (Gade, 2004, p. 11). Whether an entity is the result of a merger of two more or less equal operations or the acquisition of one by another, one eventual result is the creation of a new group containing employees from the two previous businesses. One expectation is that a new identity emerges, that the pre-existing groups are forced "to abandon parts of their old social identities, and by imposing new group memberships on workers, they alter the social categorization process" (Fischer, Greitemeyer, Omay & Frey, 2007, p. 205). Success of the merger depends largely on two groups of employees coming together (Fischer, Greitemeyer, Omay & Frey, 2007, p. 206). The case of the *Herald* and the *Sun* is unique because the two newsrooms were eventually combined, despite guarantees this would not occur (Goodhand, 2016). As of July 2022, more than six years after the newsrooms merged, management continues to maintain two websites and two newspapers, retaining brand identities to appeal to two perceived audiences (for the lack of better terms, the "low-brow" *Sun* and the "high-brow" *Herald*). As opposed to columnists like Rick Bell (*Sun*) and Don Braid (*Herald*), who "only" represent one of the two Postmedia brands, the journalists producing day-to-day news and sports coverage still represent both Postmedia brands.

If each group within a new organization retains its characteristics this may lead to an "us versus them" situation that could negatively impact the merger (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 252). It is also possible a new identity or group may not emerge immediately. A key part of a successful merger is a "sense of continuity" which may be slow in coming because employees retain their "pre-merger" identities (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 253). If an employee feels continuity exists from pre- to post-merger, then a new group may emerge (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 253). However, "anecdotal evidence suggests" some employees feel the change has been so great that they have essentially joined a new organization (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001, pp. 254). There is also the Norwegian case of Nordsjø Media, bought by the foundation-owned Amedia in 2019: editors of the targeted nine local newspapers welcomed being purchased by the larger Amedia because it had the resources to embrace the digital marketplace (Sjøvaag, Owren, & Borgen, 2021).

Hinsley (2017) analyzed organizational identity after the 2013 merger of St. Louis Public Radio (STLPR) with the online-only, non-profit St. Louis Beacon. Each news outlet "saw itself as distinctive, both in practice and form" (Hinsley, 2017, p. 151). STLPR staff considered the Beacon to be a "wonky, elite site" that produced in-depth journalism but did not meet expectations as an online news outlet, and it was not considered a serious competitor (Hinsley, 2017, p. 151). Beacon staff appreciated STLPR's news coverage but believed STLPR was a competitor for their serious-minded journalism, and it wasn't as "substantive" as the Beacon (Hinsley, 2017, p. 151). The merger was a bit rocky as journalists learned new roles and procedures. Beacon staff viewed the transition as more of an acquisition of its brand than a merger of two brands (Hinsley, 2017). Regarding organizational identity post-merger, "common ground" was found in their public service newsgathering missions and eventually employees took pride in being part of a larger newsroom, which in turn, they believed enhanced "their reputation" (Hinsley, 2017, p. 152). Interestingly, but sadly for the people of Ferguson, Missouri, the combined

newsroom gelled following the killing of African American Michael Brown in 2014 by a white police officer (Hinsley, 2017). Covering Brown's death and the protests became "the story that brought together the pre- and post-merger employees and renewed their sense of purpose" (Hinsley, 2017, p. 152). Ultimately, Hinsley concluded that her study showed "the complexity of creating a new identity for a post-merger organization and developing workers' sense of connectedness to it" (2017, p. 156).

The following research questions were inspired in part by Hinsley's research (2017).

RQ1: How did journalists at the *Sun* and *Herald* perceive the newspapers' identities pre-merger?

RQ2: How did journalists at the *Sun* and *Herald* perceive the newspapers' identities post-merger?

RQ3: How do the journalists identify themselves post-merger: from the *Sun*, the *Herald*, both or from Postmedia?

METHODOLOGY

This paper's focus is on journalists' perceptions, reflected in the overarching research questions that are the foundation for 30 questions (see Appendix) used during in-depth interviews with eight journalists from the Calgary newspapers.

In-depth interviews are more personal exchanges of information than a focus group or an online survey (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000). Also, an in-depth interview, as opposed to a focus group, is a good mechanism to explore a topic that "involves change, novelty, or uniqueness and the people being interviewed play influential or unique roles" (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000, p. 269).

Postmedia merged the *Herald* and *Sun* newsrooms on January 16, 2016. In total, 31 journalists' bylines were identified in the *Herald* and the *Sun* between November 15, 2016 (pre-merger) and December 29, 2017 (post-merger). In 2019, these journalists were emailed an interview request. Two follow-up email requests were also sent. Five people declined to be interviewed, two expressed interest but did not respond to attempts

to set up an interview, and 11 did not respond. If an email was no longer functional, attempts were made to reach the journalist via Twitter. Attempts to reach five journalists via Twitter failed. Ultimately, eight people (six males, two females) agreed to in-depth interviews. Institutional Review Board guidelines for research involving humans regulated by the author's post-secondary institution were followed. Each participant signed a consent form. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and offered a $15 Starbucks gift card as a thank you gesture.

Interviews, ranging from 38 to 85 minutes, were conducted in summer 2019. They were recorded on a digital recorder and a smartphone, and the author kept detailed shorthand notes. Transcripts of each interview were created using the Otter application and the author's notes. The transcripts were edited to remove extraneous verbiage, such as "ahs", "hmms", "um" etc.

The eight journalists are referred to as "participants" or "they" to avoid revealing gender or specific job descriptions. These participants were editors, photographers, and reporters covering various beats. Following Institutional Review Board rules and guidelines, no names were mentioned on the recordings. Two participants admitted they asked an editor if it was okay to be interviewed, in effect compromising their confidentiality. They did not express concern to the author that they revealed their participation to at least one other person. Of the eight participants, five can be considered "*Sun* people." Two participants started at the *Herald* while one participant identified who started at the *Sun* but worked for the *Herald* before the newsrooms merged identified with both newspapers. The author's late father had been a *Sun* columnist, which may have been a factor in more participants from that newspaper agreeing to be interviewed.

A deductive thematic analysis approach was used to analyze interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This deductive, or "top-down approach," allows a researcher to search for themes that have been informed by prior research (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). A theme is a tool that "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* [emphasis in original] response or meaning within the data

set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The transcript for each participant was colour-coded to identify answers that informed the three research questions. These colour-coded sections were then compiled into a separate document for each of the research questions to identify themes that tell a "comprehensive picture of their [participants'] collective experience" (Aronson, 1995, p. 2).

Generalization of data to reflect the experiences of all *Herald* and *Sun* journalists is limited by the small number of participants from each group. Qualitative inquiry accepts that rich insights may be derived from a small but highly in depth sample group. Assuming access would be granted, participant observation rather than (or in addition to) interviews may have generated more data, perhaps evening out the numbers of *Sun* and *Herald* staffers. Additionally, a more comprehensive study would have resulted from newsroom observations shortly after the merger was announced in January 2016. As these events occurred before the study began, the author instead relied on interview questions intended to elicit participants' memories of their perceptions before, during and after the merger.

RESULTS

R **Q1: How did journalists at the *Sun* and *Herald* perceive the newspapers' identities pre-merger?**

Participants were consistent in their descriptions of the *Herald* and the *Sun* pre-merger. Responses reflected intense competition between the two dailies and participants' strong identification with "their" newspaper. The *Herald* was the "paper of record," a "traditional broadsheet" with room to offer "in-depth, long reads." The *Herald* emphasized business, politics, education, and arts coverage. One participant who was aligned with the *Sun* called the *Herald* "fairly dull and boring and gray" (Participant 6, personal communication, July 29, 2019). A participant whose career began at the *Herald* suggested: "I think *our* [emphasis added] readership, average grade level is like a Grade 12 reading level. I think the *Sun* does an

average of like, maybe Grade 6 or 7 reading level" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 23, 2019).

Terms to describe the *Sun* included "punchy," "in your face," "tabloid style" with "catchy headlines," a "blue-collar paper," heavy coverage of sports and crime, politically conservative columnists and editorials, and the "underdog" in competition with the *Herald*. According to one participant, a veteran at the *Sun*:

> The *Sun* people always took a pride in the fact that we were the underdogs, and we're under understaffed and overworked compared to the *Herald* people. And we had a bit of a chip on our shoulder because generally, and especially in the earlier days, we got paid less. (Participant 5, personal communication, July 29, 2019)

Another participant with a long career at the *Sun* observed:

> Out in the public, the *Herald* seem[s] to be regarded as [a] real newspaper, whereas the *Sun* was regarded as a tabloid bunch of foolishness. Well, the *Sun* identity before the merger was of the loudest guy in the bar. The whole idea of the *Sun* was that it was going to be a kind of the anti-*Herald*. So it was positioned as the sports, rah-rah newspaper, stand up for the little guy kind of thing. It had lot of, well, the Sunshine Girl was a major selling point for years and years. (Participant 11, personal communication, July 24, 2019)

From the perspective of a participant who started with the *Herald*, *Sun* staffers were a more cohesive unit:

> *They* [emphasis added] were scrappy upstarts, and the *Herald* was this snotty, boring publication that, you know, and *we* are a little more, *we* had a professionalized view. But definitely, like especially on the *Sun* side, *they* were more family. You got a sense of that of a family, that *they* were a gang. (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019)

RQ2: How did journalists at the *Sun* and *Herald* perceive the newspapers' identities post-merger?

Perceptions of both newspapers' post-merger identities varied. Four participants who started at the *Sun* were convinced it had become more like the *Herald*, three participants (two from the *Herald* and one from the *Sun*) believed there was no longer a marked difference between the newspapers, while one participant, whose career involved both papers, insisted they were two distinct products. Opinions ranged from no "stark difference" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 23, 2019); to the *Herald* hasn't changed much but the *Sun* "could be more provocative sometimes" (Participant 3, personal communication, July 25, 2019); to both newspapers were "now more *Herald*-ish, more conservative" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019). According to this participant, "Certainly, the *Sun* doesn't have anything close to the bite it had even before, which had decreased over the years to begin with" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019).

One participant suggested there was no substantial difference between the news pages because it was unrealistic to continue the initial expectation that an overworked reporter would write a *Herald*-style "angle" (more of a "long-form journalism" story) or at least the lede (introduction) on deadline, and then re-write to a *Sun* angle ("kind of shock jock"), or vice-versa (Participant 1, personal communication, July 23, 2019). Eventually identical stories appeared in both newspapers.

> It's one newsroom for two papers, but it's essentially become a *Herald* newsroom. And, I mean, when they sit around the table in the morning and have their meetings it's still . . . they obviously discuss how we differentiate . . . the *Sun* and the *Herald* but it's less obvious by a lot than it used to be during the merger. The *Sun* focuses more on sports now more than it ever has, because we have fewer options in terms of news, and we do want to differentiate. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019)

A participant who started at the *Sun* believed that brand was "diluted" as the newsroom merger evolved and—slipping into the "us vs. them" narrative—noted the new city editor "was a *Herald* guy" (Participant 8, personal communication, July 25, 2019).

> And for years, they [the *Herald*] loathed *us* [emphasis added]. They know the *Sun* is . . . the right-winged racist rag, it's all about blood and guts, you know. That's how they saw *us* and that's how they continue to see *us*. (Participant 8, personal communication, July 25, 2019, emphasis added)

A participant who started at the *Herald* agreed with the dilution characterization but claimed both newspaper brands had suffered: "I think we've weakened significantly, the institutional coverage of the *Herald* of things like politics and the city and courts. And we've diluted the punchy, scrappiness of the *Sun*" (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019). A participant who started at the *Sun* saw less digging for news on the *Herald*'s side, but the latter paper still dominates: "Let's put it this way, the *Sun* has become more like the *Herald* than the *Herald* will ever become like the *Sun*" (Participant 11, personal communication, July 24, 2019).

RQ3: How do the journalists identify themselves post-merger: from the *Sun*, the *Herald*, both or from Postmedia?

Regarding RQ3, the replies were mixed but a strategic tactic was revealed: identify as a "*Sun* guy" or a "*Herald* person" if the potential source was a *Sun* or a *Herald* reader. Some participants either claimed they always said Postmedia, or avoided Postmedia in favour of referring to one or both newspapers, or emphasized both newspapers. Another tactic evolved: start with either the *Sun*, the *Herald* or Postmedia, but also emphasize one newspaper over the other if they believed that's what the source wanted to hear. Some sources did not know Postmedia owned both newspapers, leading to confusion or the sources's belated realization that when talking to a *Herald* reporter, comments may also end up in the *Sun*.

A participant said it was "really important" to represent both newspapers, but it was also useful to gauge the type of people encountered (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019).

> If I'm talking to people in the 'hood, I'll leave out the *Herald* part. Same thing if I'm speaking to somebody, business, or something, I probably will leave out the *Sun* just because I figure I might have more traction if I lead [with] the *Herald* and leave the *Sun* out. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019)

One participant, who started at the *Sun,* would say, "I'm with the *Calgary Sun* and *Herald*" but always led with the *Sun* out of loyalty. The participant also claimed some *Herald* colleagues "would only ever say they write for the *Herald*. Their email signatures would only say *Herald*" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019).

Usually referring to Postmedia first, one participant would also assess potential sources' newspaper preference.

> If it's someone who I would suspect to be a *Sun* reader, I would say I'm with the *Sun*. If it's someone who I quite suspect might not know what Postmedia means, but they were business-oriented or whatever, I might say I'm with the *Herald* and the *Sun*. (Participant 5, personal communication, July 29, 2019)

Two participants said they led with Postmedia, but one added that an explanation would likely follow about who Postmedia is and that the Toronto-based corporation owns both the *Herald* and the *Sun*. This information would lead to a discussion: "A lot of people will still go, 'Wait a minute, you work for both?' Then you have to give them the 30-second spiel on what's going on" (Participant 6, personal communication, July 29, 2019).

One participant suggested when colleagues say *Sun-Herald,* this reflects how the two former competitors are nearly identical "which pretty much what it is now" (Participant 8, personal communication, August 7, 2019). But this participant would also employ the strategic approach, leading with whatever newspaper name that would resonate with an interviewee.

> A lot of the times we get people [who] wouldn't talk to us because we were the *Sun*. We would call and say we're from the *Herald* when we'd be calling people you knew didn't like the *Sun* and vice versa. (Participant 8, personal communication, August 7, 2019)

This hostility towards *Sun* journalists was experienced by a participant who identified as a "*Herald* person." This participant was vigilant about referencing both the *Sun* and the *Herald* so people knew their comments could end up in both newspapers. The participant discovered that "some people won't talk to the *Sun*" but there was an advantage in stressing the *Sun* or *Herald* if it seemed the source was more amenable to one over the other. Eventually, however, the participant fell back on saying "*Calgary Herald* because it's distinctive. I don't say Postmedia because it means less to people" (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019).

Friction among editors and reporters was acknowledged by a participant: "Let's just say there's been a few set-tos among staff that were thinking in different ways" (Participant 3, personal communication, July 25, 2019). This participant said disagreements subsided over time and the thinking shifted away from "This is how we always did it here" to "This is how we're doing it." The participant said transforming a *Herald* story meant rewriting "them into *Sun* with [a] flashier lede, maybe punch it up, shorten it" because the *Herald* ran longer stories on its broadsheet pages compared to the *Sun*'s tabloid pages (Participant 3, personal communication, July 25, 2019). This practice was eventually dropped.

Another participant confirmed clashes between "two different philosophies" as staff tried to adjust to one newsroom (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019). This participant, who started at the *Sun*, was proud that *Sun* journalists were used to being pushed or motivated by editors to produce stories on deadline. The *Herald* team, however, had "been less active in mentoring and pushing reporters to do things" (Participant 4, personal communication, July

25, 2019). This participant claimed there was a blasé attitude among some *Herald* reporters about whether a story was completed by day's end, a requirement for *Sun* reporters. "If you were assigned the story, unless everything crumbled apart, there was an expectation that that story gets filed" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019). It was this participant's theory that at the pre-merger *Herald* "they sort of think the reporters should be the straw that stirs the drink. Whereas, coming from the *Sun*, I always believed it was the city desk was the straw that stirs the drink" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019).

One participant, another proud *Sun* employee, insisted *Herald* reporters left "the blood and guts" stories for the *Sun* reporters. The former "weren't really too interested in the hard news" (Participant 8, personal communication, August 7, 2019). Another example of conflicts over newsgathering techniques came from a participant who started at the *Herald*. This participant claimed *Sun* reporters were lax about talking to as many people as possible for their stories. *Sun* staffers called multiple sources in a story "padding," while a *Herald* reporter might criticize a *Sun* reporter for not chasing down an obvious response to an event or an issue (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019).

This participant said the work atmosphere after the merger could be tense because journalists were walking on "eggshells . . . trying to get along to what the new reality is" (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019). A locker room tone emerged from the predominantly male *Sun* team. "I hate to say it, it was not a good situation for women in the beginning. You don't want to hear these old dudes," said one participant. (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019). The participant relayed overhearing an "extremely offensive" conversation during an editorial meeting that included questions about what movie star could play a person in a film about their life. The participant heard one staff member say to an Asian-Canadian colleague, "Oh yeah, Jackie Chan could play you," and remembers thinking, "It's like, is that the only Asian actor you can fucking think of?" (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019).

In the same conversation...one of the *Sun* editors responded with, 'I don't know, but I want Rachel McAdams to play my intern.' Yeah, I can hear this. I'm like a foot away. I was just on the other side of a small cubicle wall. And on top of that, this young female intern is just a few feet away. And I was just like, you're not in your basement. You're actually in a workplace. (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019)

Eventually, the "newsroom chatter" became more professional after management told people to tone it down, and as the journalists came to know each other (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019). Another participant said the locker-room humour dissipated over time. "Now you kind of watch what you say and how you say it, probably with fewer expletives in your sentences and stuff" (Participant 6, personal communication, July 29, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

This newsroom merger conjoined two distinct newspapers: the scrappy, cheeky, sports, crime- and court-focused, tabloid-sized *Sun,* and the serious broadsheet *Herald* with its emphasis on culture, politics, education, local and provincial government. Responses to RQ1 show the participants' impressions of the *Sun* and the *Herald* pre-merger were consistent with the above characterizations. They reinforced the public brands of each newspaper.

RQ2 revealed participants held an allegiance to "their" former newspaper after the newsroom merger. This can be seen in the use of possessives such as "we", "us", and "they" in responses as participants referred to the *Sun* or *Herald*. This result reflects the assertion that employees retain their "pre-merger" identities (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 253). And yet there is evidence these post-merger identities were evolving. Seven of the eight participants believed the dominant content style had shifted to reflect the *Herald*, or that the two newspapers were nearly identical, suggesting these journalists did not share management's belief, or the Canadian

Competition Bureau's (Government of Canada, 2015b), that the newspapers had distinct public identities, and thus different audiences to chase. This was somewhat contradicted, as noted earlier in this article, by several journalists' deliberative self-identification as either a *Herald* or S*un* journalist when approaching potential interviewees, suggesting a recognition that public perceptions continue to draw a distinction between the two.

Responses to RQ3 reveal various uses of self-identification post-newsroom merger. Half of the participants reported a strategic use of identifying with either the *Herald* or the *Sun* first, depending on their perception of which newspaper might impress a potential source. It's likely that the day-to-day pressures of reporting on deadlines, and public hostility (perceived or real) towards either of the newspapers, pushed these journalists to employ a split identity—*Sun* for those from "the 'hood" and *Herald* for the supposed elites. Even if the journalist says "Postmedia", the source may not realize that comments can end up in both newspapers, raising ethical questions. One participant said Postmedia reminded its journalists they represent both newspapers. Here, the author acknowledges a question that deserves further exploration, given the ethical implications: in future studies, the research participants should be asked directly whether they received guidance, or not, from management regarding how to identify oneself to a source. It would seem to be in Postmedia's interest—credibility in the community, for example—to insist reporters make it clear to sources that their comments may appear in both newspapers. As noted earlier, one participant made sure a source knew comments could appear in both newspapers, but also admitted to adopting the strategic use of the *Sun* or the *Herald* "if I thought it would work to my advantage when dealing with somebody" (Participant 10, personal communication, July 26, 2019). Journalists under deadline pressure are likely to continue using this organic self-identification tool as long as the *Sun* and the *Herald* continue to publish.

Calgary Postmedia journalists—and arguably their Ottawa and Edmonton colleagues—have been toiling in new ethical territory since January 2016. The *Herald*, the *Sun*, and Postmedia have the same privacy statement on their websites directed at "users" (Calgary Herald, 2022; Calgary

Sun, 2022; Postmedia, 2022). No journalism ethics guidelines were found regarding whether a Postmedia journalist must inform a source that comments may appear in both the *Herald* and *Sun*. The Canadian Association of Journalists' ethics guidelines, under the heading "Transparency", insists journalists identify themselves as journalists to sources, but there are no guidelines for a journalist working for two newspapers in one city (2011). The participants identify themselves as journalists when contacting sources but—considering some local media professionals were not aware the two newspapers have the same owner (Participant 4, personal communication, July 25, 2019)—the practice of mentioning one newspaper and not the other may not be sustainable. And yet it is understandable that these journalists have learned to adapt to a unique situation. They work for a corporation that continues to value two perceived brands of newspapers so they must interact with sources who distrust the *Sun*, or sources who may balk at letting comments appear in one of the two newspapers.

Previous research suggested a variety of outcomes from the merger of two groups: an "us versus them" situation (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 252); the slow emergence of a new identity; and/or an unhappy employee may find employment elsewhere. An "us versus them" mentality was certainly present pre- and post-merger of the *Sun* and *Herald* newsrooms. A new, shared identity based on continuity (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001) as the merger proceeds and previous allegiances to a specific newspaper fade over time, had yet to surface when participants were interviewed in 2019, no doubt due to the "us versus them" situation. As Hinsley (2017) observed, "creating a new identity for a post-merger organization and developing workers' sense of connectedness to it" is a complex process (p. 156)**,** one that the *Herald-Sun* newsroom was still working out in 2019, nearly five years after Postmedia bought the *Sun* newspapers. And yet, it could be argued, some members of this newsroom created a shared professional practice by strategically emphasizing one newspaper over the other (and not Postmedia) when talking to sources.

Future research could focus on the audiences for the *Herald* and the *Sun*. Postmedia is betting

Calgary readers and advertisers will still buy the "cheeky" *Sun* or the "sober-minded" *Herald*. It would be instructive to learn what identities Calgary newspaper readers assign each newspaper, whether the content matches those perceptions, and whether these patterns exist in the Vancouver, Edmonton, and Ottawa markets.

This study has contributed to research on journalists' social identity by capturing reactions to a unique change in a major newspaper market with the merger of two crosstown rivals' newsrooms. Journalists' social identities die hard in a newsroom merger, but it remains to be seen how the identities of the *Herald* and the *Sun* will be reflected in their journalists in the coming years as Postmedia pursues a business strategy of maintaining two supposedly distinct newspapers. Regarding social identity theory, it has been suggested (Hinsley, 2017; Russo, 1998), that self-identification may be more as a professional journalist with a public service role rather than with the corporation that employs them. This public service role was voiced at times by participants, but their social identity was contested every day they represented two newspapers, a situation that will continue while the *Sun* and the *Herald* publish, suggesting social identity is fluid for journalists working for two mastheads and one owner.

Note: The author's father, Jack Tennant, was an editor at the Calgary Albertan when it was purchased by the Sun group and was a columnist for the Sun for 17 years.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. What was your role at the *Herald/Sun*?
2. How long have you been, or were, employed there?
3. What was your perception of the *Calgary Herald*'s "identity" before its merger with the Sun?
4. Has your perception changed?
5. If you were employed by either the *Herald* or the *Sun* before the merger, please describe what the competition was like between the two dailies.
6. Who is your competition these days?
7. At the *Herald/Sun* were you ever instructed to write or re-write a story or photo caption one way — emphasizing certain facts over others — for one newspaper and another way for the other paper?
8. Has management stated how it expects a *Herald* story to look compared to the Sun's version?
9. If so, what would that look like?
10. Would an entire story or photo caption need to be re-written or just the first few words or paragraphs?
11. How often did this happen?
12. Can you recall an event was reported differently in both newspapers?
13. When did you notice, if at all, that news stories were no longer being changed for each paper?
14. Was re-writing a story or photo caption to fit one newspaper's style a bothersome task, one that added time to a journalist's already busy day?
15. Were journalists punished if they didn't sufficiently alter the same story that appeared in both newspapers?

16. Was there any pushback by journalists against the practice of shaping a story or photo caption for either the *Herald* or the *Sun*?
17. As far as you know, is there currently competition between journalists at the two papers? Examples?
18. When you cover(ed) an event, were you representing the *Calgary Herald* or the *Calgary Sun*?
19. Does it make a difference?
20. Are sources confused, or perhaps indifferent, to whether you represent the Herald or the Sun?

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21. How many journalists now comprise the combined *Herald-Sun* newsroom?
22. How much of editorial production is completed locally versus in a centralized location?
23. Do you think public service journalism has suffered or prospered with the Herald and Sun owned by the same company?
24. Do you know if your newspapers are profitable?
25. Do you worry either the *Herald* or the *Sun* will be closed, leaving just one Postmedia newspaper in Canada?
26. Was the merger of the newsrooms [early 2016] a good or bad idea?
27. What was the rationale offered by Postmedia for merging the newsrooms?
28. Was there any friction between *Herald* staffers and *Sun* staffers during the merger?

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