

Follow the leader: How leadership can affect the future of community journalism

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This ethnographic study examines the effect leadership can have on newsroom culture and, ultimately, how news is produced. Lowery and Gade (2011) argued that the future of community journalism will happen online, and Kaye and Quinn (2010) noted that the Internet allows for different funding models of journalism. Together, this means online community journalism will take many different forms over the next decade. This study examines one popular form of community journalism: the digitally native news nonprofit. The study illustrates that when a journalist, and not a business executive or executives, controls the entire news operation, the community journalism organization focuses on quality journalism more than profits.

The journalism industry and community journalism specifically currently face a time of change, with comprehensive transformations affecting how news is produced and what it looks like when consumed (Lowrey & Gade, 2011). These changes have made scholarly arguments concerning the future of journalism more contested and relevant than ever before (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009). Economics and technology have allowed for more journalistic competition and contributed to numerous new market models for news production (Bruns, 2005; Kaye & Quinn, 2010).

As the news industry continues to change, more work that examines how news is produced at these new models of journalism is vitally needed (Singer, 2008). Kaye and Quinn (2010) argued that the Internet allows for more community journalism, as the rise in the availability of the Web makes it easier for journalists to reach people and far cheaper for journalists to start their own online-only publications.

While corporations traditionally own most legacy media outlets including newspapers and television stations, the Internet makes it far easier for anybody to own a journalistic publication, providing more opportunities for journalists to simply start their own news organization (Lowrey & Gade, 2011). This can become a reality for community journalists, both reporters and editors, once they find an appropriate funding model (Kaye & Quinn, 2010). One such community journalism funding model gaining in

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popularity is the digitally native news nonprofit (Nee, 2013), a Web-only model funded through a combination of grants and donations.

This study examines one such digitally native news nonprofit. It uses ethnography to ask the question of how leadership affects organizational culture and, ultimately, how a community journalism organization produces news. As more and more community journalism sites join the news ecology, it is becoming more obvious that the future of community journalism lies online (Paterson & Domingo, 2008). In the decade ahead, various models with different cultures and values will appear online (Kaye & Quinn, 2010). Understanding how leadership affects the culture of an organization is vital to understanding how an organization will produce news.

Ethnography is the study of culture. The method originated in the field of anthropology, and researchers have employed it to study different cultures of people, usually from foreign lands (Bird, 2009). Singer (2008) argued that we could not truly understand a news organization without ethnography. This study examines the culture of one such news organization, to understand how leadership affects its organizational culture.

Literature Review

News Organizations

Weeks and Galunic (2003) wrote that the goal of all organizations revolves around memes, which are units that carry cultural symbols, ideas and practices. They argued that organizations preserve, replicate and distribute cultural meanings. Morgan (2006) asserted that organizations rely on a series or set of rules and norms that provide members with a formal structure. Leaders transfer these implicit and explicit rules from other organizations, but, over time, each organization will acquire its own set of practices (Schein, 2006). The main reason organizations develop this structure is to maximize their ability for economic gain (Argyris, 2004).

The commercialization of the press in the United States began during the middle part of the 19th century (Baldasty, 1992). Private citizens and families began purchasing newspapers as for-profit enterprises throughout this moment in time. This began a shift away from political party-owned news organizations and toward the type of market models still prevalent today (Baldasty, 1992). Before this period, the main goal of a news organization revolved around spreading a particular ideology; this shift resulted in a strong focus toward profit (Bagdikian, 2004). Many owners of news organizations began treating newspapers as primarily a business (Baldasty, 1992).

News organizations focused equally on producing news and generating profits through advertising and circulation (Baker, 1994). In these early days of the commercial press, a distinct line evolved between the newsgathering and financial sides of the organization. For example, the work of the people in advertising became completely separate from the work of reporters and editors (Schudson, 2003). As time went on, a struggle between the business and editorial sides of newspapers arose, as ownership and management attempted to influence editorial independence. Baldasty (1992) wrote that “circulation managers defined a successful newspaper as one with high circulation and prompt delivery, and they saw the editor as a major obstacle to those goals” (p. 82). In the

early-to-mid portion of the 20th century, news organizations began explicitly discussing the “wall of separation” between the newsgathering and financial sides of the organization; it became routine to disconnect these parts of the organization to minimize influence (McManus, 1994).

This does not mean the wall eviscerates influence; in fact, studies have found that the wall is becoming more and more porous (Pompilio, 2009). An economic downturn over the last two decades forced news organizations to adopt new strategies to sell more products and attract more readers and viewers (Kaye & Quinn, 2010). Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, and Wilhoit (2007) found that journalists believe economics continue softening the wall of separation. Another survey found journalists now view business pressures as the principal threat to journalism (Journalism, 2008). And these business pressures are typically transferred to journalists through leadership, specifically leaders not normally involved in news decisions but rather business ones (Kaye & Quinn, 2010). For the vast majority of the 20th century and beyond, media organizations featured similar hierarchal models, with news department that answered to a business side. This subsequently set up a struggle between news and business interests (McManus, 1994). Currently, though, journalism faces its biggest paradigm shift since the introduction of the printing press (McChesney & Nichols, 2010), and each different publishing model that appears brings with it some new or altered norms and goals. These norms and goals make up the culture of the organization (Pavlik, 2013).

Organizational Culture

Schein defined organizational culture as a configuration of shared basic assumptions

learned by a group as it solved problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (2006, p. 17).

Leadership plays a large role in shaping organizational culture. Leaders provide the vision and communicate these ideas through conversations, resource allocation, apportionment of power, and instatement of organizational structures and processes (Schein, 2006). A detached or disengaged leader can severely and negatively affect an organization’s culture (Kets De Vries, 2001). No matter the type of organization, a leader significantly impacts the day-to-day operations (Keyton, 2005). The leader, even if he or she is not hands on, originally sets the organizational culture, and this can influence the organization long after the leader departs (Kunda, 2006). In a news organization, there are multiple departments and leaders (McManus, 1994). The editor may control the news department, but in the vast majority of news organizations, the editor must report to a leader who prioritizes the business interests of the organization (Gans, 2004). This means that usually the ultimate leadership of a news organization does not come from a journalist (Barnouw, 1997). In many of the new community news websites that have begun in recent years, though, the opposite is true: Journalists started and control these sites, which could have a significant effect on organizational culture.

Studies of newsrooms have examined the impact of leadership. One classic media sociology study combined both observation and interviews (Paterson & Domingo, 2008). Tuchman (1978), Breed (1955) and Gans (1979) conducted three of the most cited and influential examinations of newsrooms. The studies found that organization culture directly influences how a newsroom operates, and leadership significantly affects the culture. Gans (1979) found that newsroom leaders primarily put into place the wishes of corporate leaders. This means that while regular journalists may not see or communicate with the corporation that owns their organization, their routines and roles are still greatly impacted by corporate leaders. Ryfe (2009) studied a newsroom undergoing a change in leadership. He found that when a newspaper brought in a new newsroom leader, that editor imparted new rules and routines that greatly impacted news production. Corporate executives hired this leader specifically to impart these changes. This finding is consistent with other studies that illuminated how news values shifted in the digital age due to a change in what leadership desired (Schultz, 2007), and how business interests can affect who leads a newsroom and how that leader acts (Velthuis, 2006). Thus, how leadership is structured not only affects how journalists perform their jobs, but also the type of content they produce. To understand organizational culture and leadership, we must study culture.

Theory of culture

Schein (2006), when defining and outlining his theory of culture, argued that elements shape an organization's culture on three distinct levels: artifactual, the espoused values, and the basic underlying assumptions. He wrote that to understand the culture of an organization and the way that one operates, a researcher must understand cultural influences from all three levels. He defines culture as a combination of the values, visions, norms, behaviors, symbols and systems that the organizational members share and proselytize. These cultural elements provide the least pliable characteristics of an organization, and members share and spread them implicitly and explicitly.

When joining an organization, members undertake a conscious and subconscious group learning process that slowly but effectively indoctrinates them to the organization's culture; when a new member fails to embrace culture, they typically leave the organization willingly or unwillingly (Gabriel, 1999). When an organization begins, leadership extensively shapes culture; leaders remain the largest influence on organizational culture (Schein, 2006). To understand organizational culture, a researcher must understand leadership (Kets De Vries, 2001). When a researcher embeds inside an organization and studies the culture and the leadership within at all three levels, the researcher can understand the organization's culture. Therefore, the following research question will be examined:

RQ: How does leadership contribute to the organizational culture of the organization studied?

Method

Anthropologists created ethnography as a manner to study different cultures (Bird, 2009). Over time, more academic fields including communication have utilized ethnography. Singer (2008) wrote that to understand the organization's culture is to understand the organization. Spradley (1979) posited that ethnography is the art of describing a culture, and we must first understand how the culture operates before we can begin to ask questions. Researchers must immerse themselves in that culture and get as close as possible to understanding the language used. The language is not necessarily foreign to the researcher, but each culture has its own language. To perform ethnography, the researcher can utilize multiple methods (Van Maanen, 1988). This study utilizes both observation and long-form, in-depth interviews.

Observation

Before a researcher can ask informed questions of the people studied, the researcher must fully understand what he or she observed (Spradley, 1979). The three keys to any in-depth qualitative study are describing, understanding and explaining (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993). Spradley (1979) argued that the goal of observation is to grasp the observed's point of view and to realize their vision of the world.

In-depth Interviews

An interview is valuable because of the "wealth of detail that it provides" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 139). Spradley (1979) wrote that when conducting ethnographic interviews, researchers must find informants, not subjects or participants. The people are informants because they teach the researcher. Without the informant, it would be impossible to learn. Spradley (1979) wrote that to simply treat the people being studied as subjects means the researcher will attach his or her own meanings to what is happening.

Studying An Organization

This study utilizes the theoretical model set forth by Schein (2006) concerning how to study organizational culture. For Schein, culture is many things, but generally culture is the values, visions, norms, symbols, systems and behaviors the people of an organization share. Culture takes the form of the "elements of a group or organization that are most stable and least malleable" and the "result of a complex group learning process that is only partially influenced by leader behavior" (p. 5). When examining culture as he defines it, Schein distinguishes between three distinct levels of culture, or levels of analysis a researcher must observe when analyzing an organization: artifacts, espoused values and basic underlying assumptions.

Artifacts are the surface level characteristics that one can observe easily. These can include observable things such as what we see, hear and feel. They can also include products that an organization makes or owns, technology it uses, the logo of a place, clothing worn by employees, the layout of the office, etc. A researcher must enter an organization with an open mind and not interpret data at the artifactual level until more

information is gathered. Implicit in this argument is that a researcher must gather data at other levels of analysis before giving meaning to data at the artifact level.

Espoused values are the center of the second level of culture and analysis. The organization verbalizes or publishes espoused values; they could, for example, be part of a mission statement. While the organization makes espoused values public internally and/or externally, the organization does not necessarily follow these values in practice. Espoused values are ideas, goals and values that an organization acknowledges. These can be gleaned from documents such as original mission statements.

The final level of culture and analysis are basic underlying assumptions. These are unconscious beliefs shared by members of the organization. These evolve, for example, when a problem repeats itself numerous times and organizational members then solve it with the same solution. In theory, basic underlying assumptions are what prompt members of the organization to behave in the ways they do. Organizational members do not espouse these assumptions. Organizational members do not necessarily verbalize or publish basic underlying assumptions, but rather members share and act on these types of beliefs.

Schein argued that while observing all levels of culture, a researcher must note how the organization distributes power in the workplace. This is accomplished by not only identifying the titles of employees, but also through identifying decision makers who participate in those conversations. Leaders typically grant types of power to others, and finding those others and observing how that power is applied is vital to understanding how culture manifests itself. To see culture, researchers must identify how leaders allocate authority. The distribution of power heavily influences how members of an organization behave (Gabriel, 1999). People in power also develop rules and regulations. These rules are both espoused and implicit. Understanding how members of an organization deal with these rules, communicate with authority and with peers can tell a researcher quite a bit (Kunda, 2006).

The Case

A study of one particular case is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2008, p. 26). This study examines an anonymous news organization, which this study will call *The Gazette*, a digitally native news nonprofit in the United States. A group of experienced journalists launched the *Gazette* in the mid 2000s. The digital news organization includes 15 paid, full-time employees.

The *Gazette* boasts a donor model. In 2010, the organization reported \$2.22 million in revenue, while its expenses totaled only \$1.29 million. The organization’s revenue comes from a mix of foundation grants, individual donations and fundraising events. In 2010, 59% of revenue came from donations, 35% from grants and 6% from fundraising events. More than 53% of the *Gazette*’s expenses come from editorial costs. The rest of the news outlet’s expenses come from marketing and development (24%), general administration costs (19%) and information technology costs (4%).

I spent a total of 43 days and 367.5 hours in the field. My time at the *Gazette* began on Jan. 18, 2013, and ended April 9, 2013. Weiss (1994) wrote that when information acquired becomes redundant and begins to not add to conclusions, fieldwork

should conclude. By the beginning of April, the information I gathered started becoming redundant. I stayed in the field an extra week to corroborate the correctness of this determination.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) identified three stages of field note analysis. The first stage finds the researcher closely reading through the field notes and then writing initial comments in the margins. This stage is called writing memos. The second stage involves what Emerson et al. (1995) call open coding. To complete this stage, the researcher must do a line-by-line reading of the field notes and attempt to identify themes and patterns. Focused coding is the third and final stage of analysis, and this occurs when the researcher returns to the field notes with the themes and patterns in mind. This time, the researcher will begin to write a draft of the findings section. Once this is completed, the writing will begin.

This study follows these systematic procedures for analyzing field notes, interview transcripts and artifacts. I typed both the field notes and the interview transcripts; this provided an entry point for the data and became an initial reading. As I typed field notes and interviews, I would add notes in a different colored font. During the third and final stage of my analysis, I returned to the data with patterns in mind and examined it for the research question. For this study, I read the data completely 18 times.

To maintain confidentiality, throughout the findings, the news organization will be referred to as the *Gazette*, and the employees by their title.

Findings

In this study, the research question asks how leadership contributes to the organizational culture of the *Gazette*. Kets De Vries (2001) and Schein (2006) both identified leadership as a prime component of how culture develops in an organization. Leaders have a strong influence on how culture is shaped. At the *Gazette*, Editor-in-Chief is the clear leader. She spent more than 30 years in legacy media. When she took a buyout and left her prior organization, she immediately began wondering about her next step.

Role of Leadership

Over the years since the *Gazette* began, Editor-in-Chief's role at the organization shifted. At the start, employees said she played a much larger role in the organization's day-to-day operations. However, she now contributes to the overall focus of the *Gazette*, but spends most of her time dealing with business issues. During the time period observed, Editor-in-Chief focused a lot of time on a specific future funding opportunity. She frequently attended meetings concerning this opportunity. She also frequently worked offsite, editing stories while traveling to visit her children and grandchildren. Even when she was not physically in the newsroom, however, Editor-in-Chief's influence remained. She is the leader, and the culture of the organization is set and influenced by her. This culture is set even when she is not there and when visitors occasionally come to the newsroom. In various spots around the newsroom sit *Gazette* brochures that define the organization's mission statement. This mission statement, written by Editor-in-Chief, specifically notes what she wants for news. This artifact sets the tone for the organization.

When in the office, Editor-in-Chief clearly led the staff. At all meetings she attended, she controlled the conversation and facilitated discussion. Everything went through her. Other editors did not ask Editor-in-Chief specific questions about specific stories, but rather questions about the overall issues. For example, when talking about coverage of the State of the Union Address, Editor-in-Chief asked Features Editor how the *Gazette* planned to cover the event. When Features Editor responded that they would focus on “the facts,” Editor-in-Chief agreed and made her vision known: “We don’t need a narrative. If there is one, great, but if not, just the facts.” This quote paraphrases exactly what *Gazette* brochures lay out as a mission statement. She said her primary focus with the *Gazette* is quality. “I’m worried about good journalism” (personal communication, March 13, 2013). These decisions and explicit instructions were not only followed in those instances, but also recalled by other employees in subsequent situations. For example, when a reporter planned to cover a speech a month after the State of the Union, the News Editor told the reporter to “focus on the facts and don’t worry about narrative.” This advice clearly parroted Editor-in-Chief. When Political Reporter discussed how he dealt with editors, he inadvertently illustrated Editor-in-Chief’s role at the *Gazette*.

"I talk with my editor, (News Editor), all the time. We have many conversations about stories and she knows what she’s looking for. I talk with (Features Editor) occasionally, when (News Editor) is on vacation or if I’m doing an arty story or a more featury story. Occasionally I talk to (Health Editor) if it’s health related, but not very often. (Editor-in-Chief) sometimes gets in the mix as a person who pushes you in the right direction or something" (personal communication, March 21, 2013).

Political Reporter’s quote explains how Editor-in-Chief sets the direction of the news organization without becoming involved in the day-to-day decisions about coverage. News Editor and Features Editor also said that Editor-in-Chief occasionally becomes very interested in a particular topic, and that means coverage needs to focus on that issue; this idea is communication both explicitly and implicitly. For example, at a news meeting, Editor-in-Chief simply told the staff that she wanted a series concerning gun control. That series was set in motion immediately. In a different meeting, one held about a month later and without Editor-in-Chief, Features Editor noted that something in the news that day usually interested Editor-in-Chief so the staff should act accordingly and follow up with coverage. Editor-in-Chief will not say how she wants the coverage, just that she finds something interesting. News Editor said that Editor-in-Chief is very clear on direction.

"One thing is that Editor-in-Chief does set direction. She makes it clear. You know, she gives us a lot of leeway and I think Features Editor and I, well, we pretty much manage the daily. I was going to say paper, but you know what shows up every day. But I think Editor-in-Chief is very clear about giving direction about the kinds of things she thinks are important" (personal communication, March 15, 2013).

Editor-in-Chief sets the directional tone at the *Gazette* also. Employees look to her for the “right” decision. In multiple interviews, *Gazette* employees noted that whenever they find themselves unsure about how to deal with an issue, they contact Editor-in-Chief. This illustrates her role because not one reporter discussed Editor-in-Chief playing a large part in how they produce stories. When a *Gazette* reporter said “my editor,” they meant either Features Editor or News Editor, not Editor-in-Chief. But major decisions come from Editor-in-Chief. When a reporter struggled with how to cover something, not what to cover, they looked to Editor-in-Chief for guidance.

For example, an organization in a partnership with the *Gazette* became outspoken concerning a certain ballot item. Nobody in the newsroom knew exactly how to deal with the issue and immediately turned to Editor-in-Chief for answers. “I don’t want to overreact to this,” she said, “but we cannot be involved in a partnership where they’re strategizing with one side.”

In another example, the *Gazette* accepted a grant from an arts organization. The grant called for the *Gazette* to hold community meetings to discuss issues in the arts. Editor-in-Chief found herself a little indecisive about the experience at first, but after the meetings, she said she thought the partnership worked well. She noted, and again crystalized her vision for the news organization, during a morning budget meeting. This experience served as a blueprint for how the *Gazette* should approach grants in the future.

"If you were going to articulate a guideline for us, this seems like a start. This felt a little uncomfortable for me at first because we were partnering with an organization that was giving us money, and we report on them. But they were also genuinely wanting to know what was going on. So that's a sort of guideline for the future. There are probably organizations we don't want to partner with, like a liquor store that wants to know where liquor is sold" (personal communication, March 16, 2013).

Strategic Development Manager noted the tension between the business side of the *Gazette* and the editorial.

"There's never really a bad monetary opportunity for grants or whatever, I think. The editorial side might disagree. The bottom line is it comes down to (Editor-in-Chief). I mean, she has such a great background with journalistic ethics that, like, the line does end with her. So basically we have to feel out what feels right and then think about it. In the end, we ask (Editor-in-Chief) because she'll have the right answer" (personal communication, March 18, 2013).

This statement implicitly notes the difference between the *Gazette* and typical news organizations. In most cases, the decision above would be made by a leader from the business side, but at the *Gazette*, Editor-in-Chief makes the decision. She can alleviate the tension between business and editorial as she leads both, explained the Features Editor in one conversation.

“She sets the tone. We know that all decisions will be based on what’s best for the community, not what’s best for us monetarily or something. (She) knows that our

ultimate bosses are the readers and they don't care about anything but receiving the highest quality news possible" (personal communication, March 15, 2013).

During the time period observed, the *Gazette* worked on a series of stories concerning obesity in the community. An organization funded the series, and Health Editor noted how the editorial side of the *Gazette* worked with the business side of the organization on this type of story.

"It's very touchy and it was hard for (Editor-in-Chief) to say, 'OK, we've got to go out to these foundations and get money.' This is new territory for journalists, of course, but it's also our future. So we went. We've been very, very careful. News Editor looks carefully at our stories. She takes a political test on all of them so she feels they are unbiased. (Editor-in-Chief) looks again, as she reads every story. But it's something we're all really careful about" (personal communication, April 5, 2013).

Some of the journalists at the *Gazette* consider Editor-in-Chief a mentor or an idol. In interviews, numerous *Gazette* employees lauded Editor-in-Chief's experience and remarked how much they have or hoped to have learned from her.

How Leadership Shapes Culture

Editor-in-Chief informs and influences the culture of the *Gazette* on both a daily micro and macro way. During the time period observed, Editor-in-Chief worked out of the newsroom 35% of the time. When in the newsroom, the *Gazette* had a more formal environment. The staff held budget meetings, they engaged in fewer personal conversations, and the workday appeared more structured. On days when Editor-in-Chief worked from the *Gazette* newsroom, all major decisions concerning editorial went through her. This did not appear to be the case on days when she worked offsite. On a more macro level, Editor-in-Chief built the foundation of the *Gazette*, and the staff enacts her mission for the organization daily. She still retains a firm hold on communicating that mission.

Editor-in-Chief enacted a "news that matters" approach taken daily by the *Gazette*. When in the office, Editor-in-Chief sometimes verbalizes this approach concerning a story. When discussing a particular story with a reporter, Editor-in-Chief said, "Start with people directly affected and then you build around them, not the other way around. You need a place to start. We need a vehicle." This advice clearly articulates her vision of an online newspaper using context to tell stories. On a day when Editor-in-Chief worked out of the office during a trip to Vermont, News Editor told a reporter over the phone that a story needed more people affected by the incident, thus continuing the mission.

When Editor-in-Chief is out of the office, News Editor and Features Editor run the day-to-day operations, but Editor-in-Chief's mission remains present. For a series on gun violence, Editor-in-Chief called a meeting to brainstorm ideas. Before the meeting, she told News Editor and Features Editor that she could not oversee the series as closely as she would want. She implied that this meeting would allow her the ability to

communicate what she wanted out of the series, even though she would only be tangentially involved. Editor-in-Chief originated the idea for the series and called the meeting to make sure *Gazette* employees understood her vision. In the newsroom, to other editors, she said,

"I think the key would be doing it in a way that would let people see the patterns of gun violence. Maybe we pick a block that's in the middle of this and see who's here, what's happening and how this intersects with these bigger trends. I will send this note around and say, 'Let's make a big deal out of this.' But I'm doing that without knowing if it is a big deal" (personal communication, March 16, 2013).

When the *Gazette* faced the quandary of whether to publish a racist political photo, the staff looked to Editor-in-Chief for the decision. Editor-in-Chief verbalized what she saw as the predicament. The *Gazette* could run the photo, letting the community see the depiction, but it would also spread a racist image. Or the organization could describe it, and not give it any more prominence. Eventually, Editor-in-Chief decided on the latter. "I'm inclined to describe it and not print it. People can find it if they want," she said.

When Education Reporter wondered how to proceed with a story about a local university, Editor-in-Chief assisted in the decision. Education Reporter had off-the-record sources concerning an administrator at the school, but struggled with publishing the piece without attribution. Editor-in-Chief stepped in and verbalized that she did not feel comfortable running the story without this particular attribution. Editor-in-Chief consistently made this type of decision, ones that could potentially affect the *Gazette's* credibility.

In one specific instance, Editor-in-Chief's influence manifested itself without her ever actually having a say in the manner. During a three-day period when Editor-in-Chief traveled on a working vacation, one political reporter encountered a predicament: Should the *Gazette* cover a specific angle concerning a political race that might not add anything to the story, but could generate interest. "I couldn't decide what to do," the reporter said. "It was an interesting little bit of a story that would ultimately not matter in terms of the campaign, but it could upset certain people and generate interest. I knew other organizations would fully cover it."

With Editor-in-Chief away and not easily accessible, the reporter literally thought, "What would (Editor-in-Chief) do?" The reporter briefly discussed the issue with a direct editor, but neither of them could come to an understanding of exactly how to cover the situation. "We both had a similar idea of what was necessary," said the reporter, "but we didn't know exactly what to do. On one hand we could completely discuss the issue and maybe generate some interest with readers who care about prurient issues; on one hand we could just not cover the issue at all because it really did not matter and was just a propped up charge with no meaning behind it; and then on the mythical other hand, we could discuss the story briefly and just make it clear that it has no legs" (personal communication, April 5, 2013).

After spending the early afternoon debating the next step, the reporter made a decision, not based on a direct editor's opinion or their own, but on what Editor-in-Chief

would do. “I just kept going back and forth,” said the reporter, “but then I thought this isn’t too complicated. Our mission is to provide news that impacts people and helps them understand the world around them. That’s what (Editor-in-Chief) always says to do. That’s what our mission statement basically says” (personal communication, April, 5, 2013). In this particular situation, the reporter initially thought that the covering the issue at all would be a negative decision since it would bring attention to something that didn’t deserve it. But the reporter also knew other organizations would cover it and not give the community the information it needed to process the information. “I knew that our job is to provide news that matters and this was going to matter to people regardless of whether we covered it. I knew, as (Editor-in-Chief) always says, we need to impact our readers. Explaining that this isn’t news and where the information came from is what our job would be” (personal communication, April 5, 2013).

Even when she is not physically present, during the time period observed, *Gazette* employees called Editor-in-Chief to solicit advice. Therefore, even as time passes, and Editor-in-Chief delegates more and more decision-making power to staffers, she is still shaping culture. Schein (2006) wrote that a particularly strong leader’s vision would powerfully influence culture even after they step down from a leadership position. Over time, that influence dissipates but not without the emergence of a new significant leader. This has not yet happened at the *Gazette*, where Editor-in-Chief still shapes culture on a daily basis.

Discussion

The *Gazette* remains an award-winning digitally native news nonprofit producing community journalism. The three main co-founders of the organization all spent more than three decades in prominent positions at a legacy media organization in the same community. All three founders remain heavily involved in the community through charities and civic organizations.

As a newsroom, the *Gazette* spends more than 53% of its operating budget on the editorial department, and its large staff, relative to its operating budget, displays a clear and sizeable commitment to editorial quality. The organization prides itself on this commitment, with numerous mentions in promotional materials speaking to its nonprofit status and goal of providing contextual reporting that connects issues to the community. The organizational culture of the *Gazette* revolves around this commitment to quality. Editor-in-Chief, the undisputed leader of the organization, significantly impacts and sets the vision for this culture. She started the *Gazette* because of her dealings with her prior employer, which she thought placed too much of an emphasis on finances. The *Gazette*, alternately, places an emphasis on journalistic quality because of its leader.

This study illustrates that the perceived lack of quality of Editor-in-Chief’s former employer directly led to the *Gazette*’s establishment. Founders, especially Editor-in-Chief, believed the community needed another media source, one that would “fill in the gaps in coverage” created by other local media, as noted by Assistant Editor (personal communication, March 15, 2013). Founders acknowledged that they believed a nonprofit media source would alleviate the need for high profits and allow the *Gazette* to focus on providing readers with quality and important news. After surveying the country and

hearing about *Voice of San Diego*, *Gazette* founders decided they could start and support a similarly structured enterprise.

During the time period observed, this focus on quality and contextualized reporting became overtly apparent. *Gazette* staffers consistently espoused and displayed an allegiance to what the organization deemed quality journalism. This language concerning quality journalism and “news that matters” appeared on flyers printed by the *Gazette* in its early days, and years later all reporters still mentioned it as a priority. These fliers still sat prominently in the newsroom and were handed out to community members at events.

This shows how Editor-in-Chief’s leadership and mission still shaped organizational culture at the *Gazette*. *Gazette* employees rarely discussed finances. While some staffers displayed an underlying fear concerning the long-term viability of the organization’s market model, none relayed fears of layoffs or losing their job. McManus (1994) found that in market-driven organizations, a need for continuously growing revenues permeates into the newsroom and affects news production. The *Gazette* displays none of this. Conversations expressly concerning the wants of the audience did not occur. In fact, I observed quite the opposite numerous times. *Gazette* editors and reporters occasionally discussed how the audience did not want, for example, coverage of small county elections, but journalists believed this coverage affected readers and therefore boasted strong importance.

News judgment remains the underlying main element of the *Gazette*’s culture. Editors preach and practice an unadorned focus on news judgment. Reporters should find and report stories that represent the *Gazette*’s definition of news. Editors will consistently imply that content is completely dependent of news judgment. In some cases, the aforementioned anecdote concerning whether to cover a specific story about a political campaign, the *Gazette* only covered the issue so it could debunk expected coverage from other news sources. The reporter’s initial instinct was to cover the issue, but the implicit influence of leadership made the reporter rethink the decision and realize the job, in that instance, was to contextualize the situation and help community members understand why this issue did not matter.

Schein (2006) presented a theory of organizational culture that researchers can only see and understand culture through three levels of analysis: artifacts, espoused beliefs and basic underlying assumptions. The *Gazette* presents an aligned culture based upon these three levels. From promotional material to personal interviews to underlying assumptions, the *Gazette* demonstrates a newsroom focused on providing its own definition of quality journalism, which revolves around contextualized reporting on issues that affect the community, or as employees call it, news that matters.

This unified vision remains due to strong leadership from Editor-in-Chief. Both Schein (2006) and Kets De Vries (2001) stress that leadership shapes organizational culture. They wrote that, especially at the beginning when original leaders remain in positions of power, leadership provided the most important influence on culture. At the *Gazette*, Editor-in-Chief takes this role seriously. During the time period observed, staffers did not make important decisions without her. At various instances, when a staffer encountered an issue, they turned to Editor-in-Chief for a solution. All staffers noted her ability to steer the *Gazette*, even when not intimately involved in a situation. Employees discussed Editor-in-Chief as someone constantly lurking behind the scenes,

making the final decisions about major issues and, as Political Reporter noted, “someone who pushes you in the right direction.” Staffers all valued her leadership.

As Schein (2006) and Kets De Vries (2001) noted, leadership can shape the culture of an entire organization. This study illustrates that in a newsroom, leadership plays a much larger and more important role. McManus (1994), Gans (1979) and countless other researchers found that news organization leaders tend to focus on profits and, in recent years, this attention to stock prices affected newsrooms (Bagdikian, 2004). More often than not, journalists do not lead news organizations (e.g., Barnouw, 1997; McChesney, 2004). Going all the way back to Joseph Pulitzer, journalists acknowledged the potential tension between news and profits (Schudson, 1978). McChesney (2004) argued that very rarely does this tension dissipate, only when the goal of quality news coverage aligns with the goal of financial profits. Therefore, in a news organization, leadership’s influence on culture remains critical. McManus (1994) found that journalists still vocalized an ultimate goal of quality, but remained highly skeptical of leadership. At the *Gazette*, because staffers believe in Editor-in-Chief’s journalistic credibility, and because it is Editor-in-Chief’s primary mission, the entire newsroom acts accordingly. In most businesses, there is one primary, ultimate goal, but journalism serves a dual market, one for audience and one for advertising (Baker, 1994).

This study finds that in a newsroom, leadership becomes even more important to the ultimate vision due to consistent goals. In traditional newsrooms, leaders on the editorial side predominantly answer to leaders on the business side. These sides, according to McChesney (2004), rarely have the same goals. Schein’s theory of organizational culture primarily focuses on how leadership determines ultimate success. Disagreements arise between leaders and workers primarily because of differing goals. Editor-in-Chief’s leadership keeps the ultimate goals of employees uniform.

If the future of community journalism really does lie online, then many different market models, such as the digitally native news nonprofit, will begin to permeate the industry. It is important to understand each of these models’ leadership structure because that will significantly impact the type of news it covers. The industry is seeing an influx of smaller, flatter organizational models (Kaye & Quinn, 2010), models that allow for leaders to make a more direct impact. When AOL purchased Patch in 2009, many believed this changed the future of community journalism. Yet numerous studies show that corporate leadership affected content choices and journalists did not successfully engage with readers (e.g., St. John, Johnson, & Nah, 2014). Ultimately, corporate ownership decreased funding significantly for Patch sites. Journalists who start their own publications, however, do not primarily seek financial gain and are more interested in quality journalism (Nee, 2013). This could result in leadership having a large effect on the future of community journalism.

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