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Shocking the System: The Athletic, a Journalistic Merger and the (Preventable) Ensuing Fallout

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This case study applies systems theory to examine the merger between *The Athletic* and *The New York Times* from the perspective of *Athletic* journalists. As media mergers increase, research on their successes and failures can illuminate the tensions at the intersection of organizational culture, journalism, and growing corporate culture within journalism. Utilizing in-depth interviews with journalists conducted both before and months after the merger, this study examines how the *Times* failed to properly account for how slight changes—especially to journalists' perceived autonomy—could upend prior positive stasis within the organization. The study concludes by hypothesizing how negative consequences could have been avoided and what this means for future journalism—particularly sports journalism—mergers and acquisitions.

Keywords: journalism practice, organizational studies, media sociology, media economics, in-depth interviews

In January 2016, two tech entrepreneurs launched *The Athletic*, a digitally native sports website. Initially focused on Chicago, the sports news organization rapidly expanded from a Chicago-only endeavor to a sports news behemoth with more than 45 verticals across the United States and Canada (Strauss, 2022). By 2022, with more than 600 employees and roughly 400 in its news operation, *The Athletic* was second only to ESPN in employing sports journalists in the United States (Hirsh, Draper, & Rosman, 2022). Although the organization started small, its founders envisioned its growth and importance, infamously boasting to *The New York Times* that the site would eventually "wait every local paper out and let them continuously bleed until we are the last ones standing" (Draper, 2017, para. 2). During its early years, *The Athletic*'s strategy for launching successful verticals revolved around hiring locally known and respected journalists from metropolitan newspapers, sometimes by offering equity in the company (Draper, 2018). The paywalled, subscription-only site operated at a slight loss but was primarily backed by more than $140 million in venture capital funding (Strauss, 2022).

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Indisputably, much of the success of *The Athletic* before its merger with *The New York Times*, particularly its more than 1.2 million paying subscribers (Sherman, 2020), can be attributed to the high quality of its journalism, produced by outstanding journalists who often publicly praised the organization (Ferrucci, 2022b; Wagner, 2022a). In fact, many *Athletic* journalists "joined the relatively young start-up partly because they were sold on the company's ideas about reporters' autonomy" (Wagner, 2022b, para. 3). Journalism studies overwhelmingly link journalists' perceptions of their autonomy to job satisfaction (e.g., McDevitt, 2003). It was no surprise that the organization's founders eventually hoped to sell *The Athletic* so that they and their venture capital backers could realize a significant return (Draper, 2018). In January 2022, *The New York Times* announced its deal to purchase *The Athletic* for $550 million in cash, revealing that, after the deal was completed, *The Athletic* would maintain its autonomy and operate "separately from The Times's newsroom and its sports section" (Hirsh et al., 2022, para. 5).

While *The Athletic* founders and *Times* executives spoke about not changing how *The Athletic* operated, journalists noticed almost immediately a lack of transparency from *Times* leadership (Wagner, 2022a). Within months, the *Times* altered the travel budgets and approval processes for *Athletic* journalists—clearly inhibiting their perceived autonomy—and enforced rules around social media use, policies aimed at ensuring *Athletic* journalists did not discuss politics on social media (Wagner, 2022b). This study uses in-depth interviews with 12 *Athletic* journalists, conducted more than a year before and months after the site's sale, to understand, through the lens of systems theory, why the merger, according to numerous reports (Strauss, 2022; Wagner, 2022a, 2022b), did not proceed optimally, resulting in numerous *Athletic* reporters leaving the organization and/or publicly commenting negatively on the merger. The study illustrates how those two small policy changes—different processes for travel and altered social media procedures—destabilized *The Athletic*'s organizational system and caused enough tension to result in an overwhelmingly negative shift in organizational culture.

Literature Review

Journalism and Deprofessionalization

Since the commercialization of the press in the United States in the late 19th century, modern journalism has undertaken a process of professionalization, evolving into a distinct profession with a clear societal role (Örnebring, 2019). The concept of profession is a social construct discursively reified over time by members of the profession. The idea of professionalism is that "certain occupational groups are seen as possessing, among other things, special power and prestige" (Singer, 2007, p. 80). Historically, according to functionalist sociology, there are three fundamental components of a profession: expert knowledge, social function, and autonomy. More recently, though, scholars have conceptualized professionalization as a four-component notion: distinction from other occupations; a core knowledge and set of abilities; a formalized set of processes; and autonomy over entry into the field and internal accountability (Örnebring, 2019). For journalism, evidence of its evolution to a clear profession is easily apparent (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022). The first part of professionalization is a distinction from other occupations and the field can lay claim to this through the publication of information in newspapers, originally. Second, a profession necessitates a core knowledge and set of abilities, usually transmitted through education and accomplished by the early 20th-century formation of journalism education programs. The third component lies in a formalized set of

normative processes, such as field-wide ethics or belief systems. Objectivity—a concept that became an essential element of journalism—became commonplace in the 1890s and into the 1900s (Schudson, 2001). Finally, the last, and most salient for this work, component of the professionalization process revolves around autonomy over entry into the field and internal accountability, both accomplished historically through hiring practices, gatekeeping abilities, and establishing media accountability systems predominantly controlled by the industry itself (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022). It is by fulfilling these criteria that journalism, by the early 20th century, "emerged and developed as a distinct occupation with claims to fulfilling a societal role" (Örnebring, 2019, p. 1). Maintaining autonomy, however, is where journalism has experienced the least success, at least historically, especially when one considers other professions such as law, medicine, or electrical engineering, professions that require licensing and specialized education to practice legally.

When defining autonomy, sociologists often link the concept to a professional's ability to employ a "wide latitude of judgment in carrying out occupational duties" (McDevitt, 2003, p. 156). This judgment occurs within a framework, one that includes norms, routines, and traditions. For example, in journalism, a journalist can perceive that they wield a considerable amount of autonomy since they can make their own decisions, all within the context of typical journalistic routines and normative processes. In the industry, the ability to possess this autonomy over one's decision making while in the field is tantamount to the profession, something so ingrained that it is considered part of the journalism ideology itself (Deuze, 2005). Essentially, for many journalists, if they do not believe they possess total autonomy, they would rebel or, at least, believe they no longer practice normative journalism (McDevitt, 2003).

In the century that followed the commercialization of the press, from the early 1900s to the early 2000s, journalism operated as a distinct profession, with a shared set of normative practices and a relatively rigid code of ethics (Tuchman, 1978). However, in the nearly two decades since Ryfe (2009) powerfully illustrated how professional journalists valued autonomy over news production so strongly that they would jeopardize their employment to maintain it, the financial ecosystem in journalism has drastically changed (Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022). As labor precarity in the industry increased, journalists have attempted, in numerous ways, to assert their perceived autonomy. In some cases, this involved journalists trying to "recompose precarity" by exerting control over freelance policies (Salamon, 2016, p. 995; see also Kotišová, 2024). With technology increasingly impacting journalistic practices, journalists often attempt to strengthen autonomy by resisting the adoption of various digital skills (Min & Fink, 2021). For example, as artificial intelligence becomes more commonplace across the industry, and various programs become more proficient at producing journalism without actual journalistic labor, professional journalists often assert authority by imbuing their journalistic autonomy and authority by "identifying what cannot be automated" (Carlson, 2015, p. 429). In short, the struggle for autonomy in journalism is both historical and contemporary, a struggle that seemingly never subsides within the field.

This discussion of autonomy is important in contemporary journalism because of its strong link to journalists' perceptions (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022). Returning to the tenets of professionalism, it is clear that (1) the advent of the internet and its dissemination abilities have significantly and negatively impacted journalism's distinction from other occupations; (2) journalism has maintained and furthered its core knowledge and skills primarily through education programs and the growth of journalism schools (Winfield, 2008). However, more and more organizations do not hire journalism school graduates (Ferrucci, 2024),

and, more importantly, journalism schools have started to move away from teaching traditional core journalism skills (Besbris & Petre, 2020); (3) the notion of normative processes across the whole of American journalism, such as the ones displayed in Ryfe (2009), can be questioned as organizations seemingly have more and more agency to enact whatever nonnormative processes they desire (Buschow & Suhr, 2024; Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022). In short, it is the tenet of professionalism that espouses a notion of autonomy that holds the profession of journalism together currently. Waisbord (2013) contended that "professions are permanently subject to change" because "society, economics, politics, and other transformations apply pressure" (p. 212). Furthermore, professions do not simply change, as many are subject to deprofessionalization, which is "indeed a probable fate of some professions" due to various destabilizers to the occupation (Toren, 1975, p. 324). For journalism, if journalists perceive a loss of autonomy, particularly due to corporate interference that contradicts the normative notions undergirding the profession, a process of deprofessionalization could begin.

Therefore, as noted above, journalistic autonomy is a "fiction," something never accomplished, but still incredibly important to journalists themselves (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022, p. 275). While scholars define "autonomy to mainly mean autonomy from external forces seeking to influence the news," or, more specifically, independence from political and commercial actors (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013, p. 416), it is acknowledged that it is the responsibility of newsrooms to make journalists perceive that they wield this autonomy over news production (McDevitt, 2003). As a result, journalists often feel that there are numerous production processes—from managing reader hostility (Perreault, 2023; Perreault & Miller, 2022) to implementing innovations (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021; Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020)—they must conduct autonomously. Journalists have proven remarkably capable of doing so. The perception of this autonomy—the belief that they can do their jobs without outside interference—is not only integral to journalists performing their duties optimally (Ryfe, 2009), but also a large indicator of their job satisfaction (McDevitt, 2003; Plotner & Ferrucci, 2024). In short, considering the amount of precarity inherent in today's journalism in America, journalists need to perceive that they have autonomy over their news decisions for them to feel valued (Bélair-Gagnon, Holton, Deuze, & Mellado, 2024). This perception, while an individual-level trait, is strengthened or weakened by an interplay of individual-level perceptions and organizational-level attributes (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022); perceived autonomy can be seen as a significant and influential part of a system of forces coming together.

Systems Theory

Sociologist Parsons (1968) introduced systems theory as a functionalist approach to thinking about how society, or organizations, are part of a complex system impacted by numerous factors. Parsons (1968) contended that, for an organization to survive and thrive, there are four functional problems it must be capable of solving: it must have the capacity to adapt, attain goals, integrate new parts into the system, and maintain itself if there are changes to the system. In essence, akin to understanding the biological and physiological aspects of the human body, the theory contends that any change to the overall system in which the organization exists will have impacts. When studying organizations from a systems theory approach, researchers must understand that "social organizations do not occur naturally in nature; they are contrived by man" and that the actions of people from within and outside the organization "cannot be separated from the processes" of the organization (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972, p. 455). Therefore, when

studying organizational change, it is tantamount to consider that forces catalyzing change come from both the macro and micro levels of an organization, creating a sort of feedback loop, and individuals at all levels of the organization must be united to survive this change optimally (Caldwell, 2012). In effect, when researchers apply systems theory to the study of organizations, the interplay between management and workers, between, in this case, organizational policies and the perceptions of individual journalists, must be considered (Stern & Barley, 1996).

Scholars of organizational change view the process of successful change as akin to learning, one that includes members from all hierarchy levels; fundamentally, for this learning process to thrive, there needs to be support for organizational members (Senge, 1990). Since power in organizations is unequally distributed, strong leadership is needed to take "initiative toward participation," making non-leaders feel like their input is valued or part of the decision-making process (Hofstede, 1980, p. 56). Leaders must always remember that if they want to enact successful change in their organizations, these new "organizational goals must always be legitimated by organizational values" (Clegg & Dunkerley, 2013, p. 175). Moreover, if new goals do not align with historical organizational values, organizational members may revolt in some manner. And while "successful change" may be defined differently across various organizational power strata, all groups aim to attain goals and share the belief that organizational success is a common priority (Stouten, Rousseau, & De Cremer, 2018). An organization's identity, as perceived by its members, is undergirded by its values, and introducing goals that do not align with those values risks employee disengagement, loss of employees, and reduced buy-in, ultimately affecting productivity negatively. Stable, communicative leadership that evokes trust is the best defense against organizational failure resulting from implemented change (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001). Therefore, while systems theory may focus on organizational-level success, its application necessitates an understanding of individual-level attributes because, as previously noted, the theory acknowledges the lived experiences of organizational members as ineradicably connected to successful organizational change (Stouten, Rousseau, & De Cremer, 2018).

In journalism, numerous scholars illustrate how organizational structure and leadership impact newswork. Breed (1955) argued that organizational policies, more than professional standards, oriented how journalists did their jobs. While Breed (1955) contended that power dynamics among individuals in the newsroom wielded this influence, others have cautioned that the organization itself is "a source of constraints, influencing or determining media production," and while professional norms do impact people within the organization, the actual structure and policies of the organization can also significantly influence how journalists do their jobs (De Bruin, 2000, p. 219). For example, an organization's decisions to adopt or not adopt technology can alter not only news practices but also journalists' professional identities (Ferrucci, Taylor, & Alaimo, 2020). Therefore, Lowrey's (1999) argument that organizational policies and structure should be studied to fully understand why newswork happens the way it does in a specific newsroom is logical. Moreover, Ferrucci and Kuhn (2022) theorized that while many media sociologists often consider professional norms more impactful than organizational policies and structures, today's media ecosystem suggests differently, indicating that the organization is the fulcrum of influence. However, journalism studies research, like much work on various professions, features much research "at the individual (or group) level of analysis, and the systemic or 'macro-social' consequences of filtering most of life through organizational lenses remain undeveloped" (Stern & Barley, 1996, p. 149). In effect, the workings and policies of an

organization, writ large, impact both its members and its systems, which in turn significantly impacts organizational members' perceptions.

The Athletic and Today's Sports Journalism

As a news organization with a nontraditional market model that quickly became a major force in sports journalism, *The Athletic* has been examined from various perspectives by journalism studies researchers. According to Ferrucci and Perreault (2024), the site's success and business model could provide a prototype for local news across the United States. Like many other venture-capital-backed news organizations, *The Athletic* does not try to alter historical notions of journalism, but rather embraces a return to the type of sports journalism popular in local metropolitan newspapers during the heyday of print journalism (Draper, 2017). Both Clavio and Moritz (2021) and Ferrucci (2022b), utilizing differing theoretical frameworks, examined introductory columns penned by *Athletic* journalists. In the first five years of the site, new journalists would write a column explaining why they chose to work at *The Athletic*. Overwhelmingly, analyses of these columns illustrated how journalists longed for the perceived professional autonomy *The Athletic* offered. Buzzelli, Gentile, Sadri, and Billings (2022) found that *The Athletic*'s success forced daily newspaper editors to rethink their approach to covering local sports *because The Athletic* covered professional sports so well, newspapers were forced to focus on local high school sports to differentiate themselves. Similarly, the same group of researchers (2021) found that the perceived autonomy, higher salary, and stronger job security from *The Athletic* made daily newspapers consistently afraid of losing their higher-profile sports journalists. Therefore, this study asks the following research question:

RQ1: What did changes to The Athletic processes and policies enacted by The New York Times at the organizational level reveal about the merger of two organizations concerning professional autonomy in the newsroom?

Method

To answer the research question posed by this study, researchers used in-depth interviews. An oft-used method in social science research, in-depth interviews provide scholars with the ability to understand participants' "internal experiences" surrounding certain subjects (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). In short, the in-depth interview is "a narrative device which allows persons who are so inclined to tell stories about themselves" (Denzin, 2001, p. 25); therefore, in-depth interviews allow researchers to understand the meanings participants give to their experiences (Seidman, 2006). When utilizing the method, researchers have three objectives: summary, interpretation, and integration (Weiss, 1994).

For this study, the researcher conducted 24 in-depth interviews with 12 full-time journalists at *The Athletic*. The first author conducted initial interviews—focused on the overall perception of working at *The Athletic*—via Zoom between May 2020 and February 2021. The researcher recruited participants by obtaining a full list of all employees and then randomly e-mailing approximately 50% of the journalists at the organization. For the initial wave of interviews used in this study—before the merger—the first author interviewed 65 journalists, one founder, and nine members of the organization's business staff. For this

study, the first author then contacted journalists still with the organization after the merger to request a follow-up interview. Thirty-one journalists responded positively, but the first author ceased scheduling more interviews after conducting 12 follow-up interviews. The interview stoppage occurred upon reaching saturation, which occurs when "the interviewer begins to hear the same information he/she has already obtained from previous interviewees" (Alsaawi, 2014, p. 152). The average interview time, including initial and follow-up in-depth interviews, was approximately 41 minutes, consistent with studies utilizing in-depth interviews (Weiss, 1994). For this study, the 12 participants interviewed twice included eight men and four women. All worked for different verticals (i.e., *The Athletic* Boston or *The Athletic* Denver): 10 were reporters and two were editors, and reporters covered professional sports including baseball, football, basketball, and hockey. The average age of the participants was 43. Follow-up interviews occurred between May and August 2022.

The initial interviews for this study were conducted as part of an in-depth case study focusing on *The Athletic*, a case study that included in-depth interviews, some participant observation, and document/textual analysis. The first author aimed to completely understand the organization's processes, routines, norms, mission, and overall organizational culture. The in-depth interviews for this study began only after much research was conducted through textual analysis and some participant observation and, therefore, featured informed questions about practices, organizational culture, etc. After the organization was sold to the *Times*, the first author waited for it to stabilize and for implemented changes to happen before conducting the follow-up in-depth interviews, which included the same questions concerning news production (e.g., story coverage, processes for recently published stories, hierarchical perceptions), as well as focused queries about the changes implemented and perceptions surrounding new ownership. All participants were granted confidentiality, and the researcher's Institutional Research Board approved all procedures.

Data Analysis

When analyzing the data, the researchers employed the qualitative data analysis processes defined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011). This three-stage process for data analysis commences with the memo stage, which features a thorough reading of the data while writing notes concerning all pertinent or noteworthy passages and thoughts. The second stage, entitled open coding, starts with the researcher conducting another close line-by-line reading, focusing on themes and patterns this time. Finally, the third stage, focus coding, features the researcher conducting one more line-by-line reading of the data—this time with patterns and themes in mind—and categorizing the data into these themes while drafting the findings section. Because of Institutional Review Board restrictions and the fact that this data came from an aforementioned larger study, only the first author conducted the data analysis and then wrote the findings.

Findings

As previously noted, within months of *The New York Times* finalizing its acquisition of *The Athletic*, two significant changes influenced the latter's organizational policies: The introduction of a new travel policy and the implementation of rules governing how *Athletic* journalists used their social media accounts. Beyond these explicit policy changes, a more subtle change—how superiors communicated with *Athletic* journalists—

also impacted organizational structures. The following findings section details how these changes affected overall autonomy and the joy experienced within *The Athletic*.

Travel Policy Changes

When *The Athletic* launched in 2015, many metropolitan newspapers were tightening budgets for sports journalists, especially around travel. One *Athletic* baseball reporter explained before the *Times* acquisition, "When I got the call about joining the (*Athletic*), it was maybe a month after I was told I wouldn't be able to travel to about 20% of road games." They added this "really affected my decision. I knew I couldn't do my job the way I wanted if I wasn't in the clubhouse regularly." To sports journalists, particularly beat reporters whose job revolves around covering the day-to-day happenings of a professional sports team, access is tantamount to successfully covering a team. "If I'm not there," explained one journalist talking generally about traveling with the team he covers, "I'm potentially missing stories. That's the obvious truth. The less obvious, maybe, is that I have worse relationships with my necessary sources than other (journalists covering the team)."

Unmistakably, a journalist's ability to travel and attend the games they cover significantly impacts their perceived autonomy in newswork. When the *Times* altered the travel policy for *Athletic* journalists, this created inevitable friction. Although two of the 12 participants contended that the changes to the travel policy changes were not too onerous, they still believed these changes would have seismic impacts. One explained,

> These aren't that bad, you know? Yes, [the *Times*] is making it harder for us to travel as much as I want, but they're not saying we can't do it or anything like that. The problem is it feels like I have to basically beg now to do what I want. That's going to take time away from doing my job, you know? Before, it was seriously easy. If I had a good story idea, I could do it. Now, I'm not so sure because maybe I won't be to do the travel.

Implicit in that quote is a clear illustration of how this policy change, which most participants labeled as major, even significantly affected the minority of participants who labeled it minor. More saliently, it demonstrates how a policy change affects both perceptions of autonomy and overall experienced joy. Every interviewed journalist, in one way or another, lamented how the policy might impact their ability to tell the stories they felt necessary. One journalist wondered, "What if this (policy change) makes me miss the big one, the story of the season?" A different participant, speaking before the merger, spoke at length about how much they value *The Athletic*'s liberal travel policies. "Really," they said,

> the best part about working here is knowing I'm in the action. Even now as we sort of move out of COVID, I'm (at games). The (league) still hasn't given us back full access, but I'm (at games). I can't say the same about everybody else (covering the team at other news organizations).

It is clear from the above quotes that journalists connect the ability to travel as much as they see fit with their perceived autonomy over their beats. The travel, to them, provides the framework for optimally

covering teams. In these cases, the dynamic interplay between systems-level policy and individual-level emotion becomes clear: A small change in organizational policy impacts journalists' perceptions of autonomy, which then negatively affects the entire organizational system.

Multiple aforementioned quotations discussed how working with this new policy would negatively affect how they did their jobs. One more outspoken participant noted, "It sucks. The whole thing sucks. I don't want to deal with it and now I have to. Every day I have to wonder what the fuck is next?" With the environment that once strengthened their perceived autonomy gone, participants struggled to adjust to their new reality. To many participants, it is clear that the pre-*New York Times*-owned *Athletic* was a great place to work because it provided the tools to excel at the job. When shielded from the organization's financial influences, *Athletic* journalists felt autonomy and developed an allegiance to the organization. Before being sold, one participant said, "This is the best job I've ever had. I've never felt like everyone, from the top down, really had an interest in me succeeding." Inherent in that quote is the implicit belief that from ownership down to beat journalists, *The Athletic* once had an alignment of goals focused on producing quality journalism. That same participant, asked about that prior quote months after the acquisition, said, "No. I don't feel that way anymore. [*The Times*] thinks of us as a way to grow their subscribers, to meet some subjective subscriber goals, not as something that's supposed to do awesome work." Clearly, to this participant and many more, there is a feeling that this travel policy change is far bigger than just a policy change. It represents a de-emphasizing of quality work, something that negatively affects journalists' perceived autonomy. Obviously, *The New York Times* would not have purchased *The Athletic* if the organization did not believe it would be a positive economic decision, a way to maximize profits—and the journalists interviewed overwhelmingly acknowledged this—but admittedly small policy changes should not then result in overwhelmingly negative feelings if handled correctly. As one journalist explicitly noted, "They're not a big deal, really. It just wasn't filtered down to us well and felt like a big deal, which makes me think (the travel policy change) is just the tip of the iceberg." Implicit in that quote is the understanding that if communicated differently, the change could not have destabilized the organizational system.

Social Media Policy

Particularly during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic when most professional sports ceased operations, journalists at *The Athletic* appreciated how the organization's management allowed them to freely express themselves through social media and on the website. "Just take a look at some of the work we did in those early days of COVID," said one journalist, adding,

> we really advocated for causes. We got behind [the Black Lives Matter movement], for example, and did some good work around it. We were political, in the context of sports and society. We can't do that anymore, especially on Twitter. Like, I can't be political. How the fuck is racial justice political? It is, I get it, sadly, but I can't advocate for it? That's wrong now? Why? Money of course.

The aforementioned quote is a reaction to a meeting in early June 2022, where *The Athletic* leadership attempted to explain the organization's new policy on social media, a policy introduced by the *Times*.

Many participants described the policy change as "nonsensical" and "ridiculously dumb" and the like. One explained,

> The company says we can have opinions of social things, but problems come if we make those opinions political. They used guns in the country as an example. Like, how can gun violence not be political in this country? The whole thing is so dumb.

The journalists interviewed did not believe the organization's social media policy change necessarily affected their professional autonomy, though a small number did speculate it could. One explained, "They're saying if I talk about a cause, I might not be able to write about it in the future. That could definitely change how I do things." However, the participants overwhelmingly discussed how this policy change negatively affected their view of the entire organization. "It seems silly now," said one journalist,

> but I always got the feeling from Alex and Adam [*Athletic* founders Mather and Hansmann, respectively], that they really cared about the world around us and making it better. Yeah, we're doing [sports journalism], but we're also doing it right and calling out the crap. Now that's, I think at least, not the case. Now it's like I work at every other capitalistic shop.

This policy change, as perceived by this study's participants, negatively affected their views of the organization. One journalist noted that they "never do anything remotely political on Twitter or Facebook," but this policy "still makes me angry and, you know, less proud to work here." It is therefore important to understand that policy changes, no matter how immense or slight, and regardless of whether they directly impact organizational members, need to align with organizational missions. *Athletic* journalists believed that, based on the actions and statements of the founders, social causes were integral to the organization's mission. However, the *Times*' policy changes did not align with this mission.

Communication Practices

In in-depth interviews conducted before and after the acquisition, journalists described the organization's communication with employees as a key and significantly positive aspect of its culture. One journalist noted,

> It's amazing. I've never seen anything like it. I've worked for three different newspapers and did that for more than two decades. I can probably count on one hand how many times I heard from ownership. We do all the time here. And they always take questions.

Over and over, participants echoed this sentiment. Speaking before the merger, one journalist said, "They answer questions here, so I think I know what's going on. Even when we had a small amount of layoffs a few months ago, the founders Adam and Alex, they really explained why and how decisions were made." This perceived openness changed, according to participants, almost immediately after the announcement of the merger. The openness of this communication aligns well with the mission of journalism, so while organizational management may use open communication for differing reasons than journalists, the alignment of goals can still have positive repercussions. "We want the same things," said one journalist

talking about *Athletic* owners before the merger. "I think they do this because they know we won't tolerate, seriously, anything different." This statement suggests that nontransparent communication would not yield positive results in the newsroom, which may explain why prior ownership adopted it, even if they did not truly believe in it.

Participants interviewed after the announcement all shared similar perceptions about the organization's communication practices. One journalist said, "It was like we were in a movie about body snatchers. People looked the same, but they didn't act the same at all." Overwhelmingly, participants discussed how in the aftermath of the sale announcement, *The Athletic* founders and other leaders from both *The Athletic* and *The New York Times* would periodically speak to employees and say they were going to be open and transparent, but then not actually answer questions. "It was a literal waste of everyone's time, over and over again, including their time," recounted one journalist. Participants talked extensively about how, early on after the announcement, they were told it would be "business as usual" for *Athletic* journalists and that nothing would change imminently. However, when asked about potential changes, or areas where changes could be made, *Athletic* journalists said leadership from both organizations would not directly answer. "They stonewalled us," said one journalist. "There is no doubt they had an inkling, a little inkling, right, about what was going to happen. But they wouldn't tell us." Another participant, discussing the same subject, said,

> They knew but wouldn't tell us. I get it to a point, but it was like I was no longer working for *The Athletic*. Everything changes. Nothing was the same. The way this was handled was not like where I'd been working for [years].

Other journalists contended the clear change in communication became obvious not in the frequency of communication, but in its substance. One participant, explaining this phenomenon in a similar way as others, said, "It's odd because we were started by entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley basically," they explained about *The Athletic* founders. "I would have assumed there would be a lot of cliches and not much heft to what they said. But it was the opposite. Then it became exactly that after we were sold, and, frankly, it was very frustrating."

Discussion

Amid the sale of *The Athletic* to *The New York Times*, *The Athletic* was shaken by high-profile departures. Journalism, of course, has a retention problem—a fact that surprises no one familiar with the field's working conditions and expectations. A fair degree of research in journalism studies has explored this concept of why journalists leave the field (e.g., Mathews, Bélair-Gagnon, & Carlson, 2023; O'Donnell, Zion, & Sherwood, 2016). And it is here that *The Athletic* seemed to present an intriguing model: It was national, yet hyperlocal; niche, yet broad; subscription-based but digitally savvy (i.e., Buzzelli, Gentile, Sadri, & Billings, 2022; Clavio & Moritz, 2021; Ferrucci, 2022a, 2024; Ferrucci & Perreault, 2024). This study set out to consider what processes and policies enacted by *The New York Times* revealed about the merger—specifically about professional autonomy—and, more broadly, about its effect on the organizational system of *The Athletic*.

To someone outside of journalism, slight changes to travel policies and social media posting may seem trivial at best and annoying at worst, but in journalism, such modifications can have large ripple effects. With autonomy being a vital part of professionalism in journalism—especially as other elements of professionalism were under attack (Ferrucci, 2024)—even slight procedural changes to journalistic practice were perceived as major alterations by *Athletic* journalists. This aligns with systems thinking. Caldwell (2012) contended that if we consider an organization a system, one governed by both those inside (in this case the organization) and outside (the profession of journalism), then even minor changes can catalyze major effects, and that for a change to be successful, those inside the organization must perceive it to be positive or benign. If that does not occur, there can be negative disruptions to the system. Moreover, Luhmann (1995) argued that in systems thinking, function comes before structure. Therefore, in journalism, the normative notions at the heart of the profession, notions such as autonomy, are actually what shape the organization or field (Görke & Scholl, 2006). Together, this means that the *Times*' decision to withhold information about upcoming changes led to distrust within the organization, which negatively affected perceived autonomy, threatened professionalism, and resulted in a failed attempt at organizational change.

Organizational change necessarily reflects change that is also financial, which is typically considered negatively by journalists. Yet it is noteworthy that much of the aspects of positive newswork at *The Athletic* experienced by journalists required no financial support: Journalists valued the perceived autonomy they had to produce their best work (Pettigrew et al., 2001). From the perspective of news production, pre-*New York Times* merger, *The Athletic* provided what journalists perceived as the most essential component to thrive. The changed experience—marked by a lack of transparency and autonomy—departed from expectations, creating a mixture that was bound to disrupt the work and require acceptance from *The Athletic* reporters. Without that acceptance, disruption to the system was inevitable, a consideration that any news organization expecting a merger or leadership change in the future should be hypercognizant of before implementing changes.

The merger between *The Athletic* and *The New York Times* is an example of a growing trend within the media space. It is not a rare occurrence. While Bagdikian (2004) began warning the field about the perils of mergers and acquisitions in journalism more than two decades ago, the frequency of these deals has not slowed, and many insiders believe the second Trump administration will catalyze a large wave of new media mergers and acquisitions (Ourand, 2024). It is with this mind that the key takeaway from this study emerges. If it is arguable that journalism is currently experiencing at least some elements of deprofessionalization (Ferrucci, 2024), and more media mergers are expected, then the lessons learned from this case study should have wide-ranging implications. Even slightly more than a handful of years ago, Waisbord (2018) argued that the then-current media system faced "seismic changes," such as "the end of information scarcity, multilayered news and communication environments, and the active role of publics in news production, access, and use" (p. 1868). Those are all here, and they are contributing to this deprofessionalization process. Therefore, as acknowledged previously, many of the key tenets of professionalization are outside of journalism's control, but journalists' perceived autonomy over their own work is primarily not, and it may be the main thing holding the profession of journalism together. In any future journalistic merger, this must be kept in mind. These seemingly minor changes to the processes at *The Athletic* had seismic effects as they caused journalists to question their autonomy, which then destabilized the entire organization and led to numerous departures and much public griping (Wagner,

2022b). Simply put, considering the presence of deprofessionalization, merging or acquiring journalistic organizations must keep perceived autonomy front of mind to improve chances of a successful endeavor.

Another key takeaway from this study, for journalism in the future, lies in the notion of goal alignment. For a merger such as this to achieve overall success, there needs to be an understanding of how any planned change aligns with historical organizational goals. The *Times*, by proxy of all the reporting it did on *The Athletic*, either ignorantly believed infringing on journalistic autonomy would not matter, or simply did not care that *Athletic* journalists, through years of public expression (Clavio & Moritz, 2021), connected the perceived autonomy granted by the organization as tantamount to their employment. However, Hofstede (1980) contended that for any change to find success, for any organization to successfully navigate a disruption, non-leaders must feel like their voices are heard and that their opinions matter. Participants clearly did not believe this occurred in this particular case. Over and over, the lack of transparency displayed by *The New York Times* negatively affected journalists' perceptions of their new employer. All of this could have been avoided by simple measures that would at least have made *Athletic* journalists feel valued as they were in the past. Thus, while it could be said that the *Times* still accomplished its financial goal through the purchase of *The Athletic*, it clearly did not want an onslaught of negative public relations caused by its callous handling of the merger. Regardless of the merger's future success, in that moment, the *Times* faced significant negative press that probably could have been totally or partially avoided with ease.

As with all studies, this one's findings should be considered alongside its limitations. First, as an interview study, this study focuses on the perceptions of those interviewed; there is no way to know if participants' experiences are the same as objective reality. This limitation is especially salient as the study's data set is based on multiple interviews with 12 journalists. While this overall sample size is in line with other in-depth studies, it is important to note that this number represents approximately 5% of all journalists who worked at *The Athletic* throughout the period that stretches between the two sets of interviews. Finally, it should also be noted that, as this study's introduction recounts, multiple mainstream news organizations published stories concerning some of the problems that occurred during this merger, stories that could have conceivably primed the answers participants provided during interviews.

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