Converging on Quality:

Integrating the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio Newsrooms

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Presented to the Newspaper and Online News Division

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

2014 Annual Conference

Abstract

This paper reports the first phase of research about the merger of the St. Louis Beacon, a nonprofit online news startup, and St. Louis Public Radio. Based on a semi-structured interview with the editor of St. Louis Public Radio and a content analysis of articles posted on the two organizations' websites, we conclude that the combined news organization has made initial progress in integrating complementary strengths based on several quantitative indicators of news quality.

Converging on Quality:

Integrating the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio Newsrooms

In December 2013, the staff of the St. Louis Beacon, a nonprofit news website founded in 2008 by Margaret Wolf Freivogel and other veteran journalists, joined St. Louis Public Radio, a National Public Radio station owned by the University of Missouri (McPherson & Miller, 2009; Nelson, 2013; Singer, 2013). The Beacon was one of several nonprofit local news websites formed after staff reductions at major metropolitan daily newspapers such as *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Konieczna & Robinson, 2013; McPherson & Miller, 2009). Many of these nonprofit news organizations have established themselves as industry innovators with a mission to engage in conversations with the community, collaborate with other news providers, experiment with multimedia and new forms of journalism, and to provide in-depth analysis of local issues (Nee, 2013). Freivogel, who had taken a buyout with 40 other *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* newsroom employees in 2005, realized that cuts at the newspaper would reduce the amount of in-depth civic reporting (McPherson & Miller, 2009). As with other nonprofit news websites, the Beacon was founded to complement the local daily newspaper as much as to compete with it. Beacon journalists have described their mission as filling gaps in local news coverage (Ferrucci, 2013). The Beacon adopted innovative practices such as establishing a robust presence on social media and collaborating with the St. Louis public television station to cover issues such as the effects of the mortgage crisis on the region (Freivogel, 2009; McPherson & Miller, 2009). Previous studies involving organizational change within newsrooms, media innovation, and convergence journalism suggest reasons for both optimism and caution for the combined news organization. In particular, journalists share common cultural values that could help or hinder the success of

the merger of the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio.

Along with the merger of the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio, the University of Missouri formed a collaboration of the Reynolds Journalism Institute, the Missouri School of Journalism, and the University of Missouri-St. Louis College of Fine Arts and Communication to offer research and other support to the combined newsroom (Nelson, 2013). This paper reports the first phase of a study of the integration of the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio news staffs. This initial research included a content analysis of news articles posted on the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio websites before and after the merger. It also included a semi-structured interview with St. Louis Public Radio Editor Margaret Wolf Freivogel, one of the founders of the Beacon, and limited observation of St. Louis Public Radio news meetings. A second phase of this research will include semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation of journalists and other stakeholders in the combined news organization. We have received Campus Institutional Review Board approval for elements of this study that involve interaction with St. Louis Public Radio journalists and other stakeholders.

The St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio have combined their news staffs in an effort to maintain a robust, independent journalistic voice in their community. As Freivogel (in Nelson, 2013) observed, the merger could "lay down a trail for how it could be done" in other cities. The outcome of this effort could provide lessons for both journalists and mass communication scholars. The intent of this research is to document the integration of the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio news staffs—with the hope of contributing to understanding of how journalists adapt to organizational change, how they produce news for multiple media platforms, and whether not-for-profit ownership by a higher education institution influences their newsroom

practices and the impact of their journalism in the community they serve. The theoretical

framework for this study is the influence model developed by Meyer (2009), in which a news

organization's societal influence co-exists with and enhances its commercial influence. Although

this model was developed to explain how newspapers succeed financially by providing valuable

civic information to readers, we believe the model also has relevance to donor-supported news

organizations such as the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio.

Literature Review

Numerous researchers have investigated the influence of organizational and journalistic

cultures on newsroom work practices. For example, Gade and Perry (2003) examined the impact

of organizational change in a four-year ethnographic study of the newsroom at *The St. Louis

Post-Dispatch.* Newsroom employees at first were open to a new editor's attempt to the change

the culture at the *Post-Dispatch* by establishing a team-oriented structure intended to encourage

innovation. Over time, journalists began to perceive the changes as infringing on their individual

autonomy. In particular, many newsroom employees believed that top managers did not value

the newspaper's more experienced journalists. They also were uncertain about the value of the

new editor's advocacy of civic journalism, intended to help solve problems in the community.

The editor, Cole Campbell, resigned less than four years into his tenure.

Gade (2004) observed that efforts to adapt to technological and other challenges can

require journalists "to rethink some fundamental principle of their work: their sense of news,

audience, organization, and even the purpose of journalism" (p. 11). Successful organizational

change is dependent on a sense that news managers are willing to share power with their

employees, he wrote. In a survey of managers and employees at 18 newspapers engaged in some

level of organizational change, Gade found that employees and managers shared important

journalistic values. However, employees often lacked trust in their managers and disagreed over

whether they were working together to improve newsroom culture. Daniels and Hollifield

(2002) found evidence that journalists view organizational change less from a "human response

to uncertainty" that is common in non-newsroom environments and more as a potential threat to

"the professional rewards they derive from their work" (p. 675).

Lowrey (2011) suggested that traditional news media have struggled to adapt to change in

part because of their institutional nature. Concerned with legitimacy and established ties and

practices within their industry, institutional organizations such as newspapers tend to respond to

uncertainty by following proven approaches or making incremental changes. This emphasis on

accepted practices "contributes to change efforts that are fleeting, skin deep, merely ceremonial,

or unpopular with staff" (p. 67). By contrast, innovative news organizations that are willing to

connect with a more diverse network "beyond the field of similar organizations" (p. 68) for new

ideas might be able to achieve more substantial change.

Although journalists in other news organizations have struggled to adapt to change, the

St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio, which have been working together on projects

since the Beacon was founded in 2008, bring a record of innovation and collaboration to their

merger (Nelson, 2013). Thirteen journalists from the Beacon have joined 13 journalists from St.

Louis Public Radio to form the combined newsroom. Three Beacon employees joined the

business and development staff of St. Louis Public Radio (University of Missouri, 2013).

Based on these studies, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1a. *What are the challenges for journalists related to combining the organizational*

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cultures of the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio newsroom staffs?

RQ1b. *What are the concerns for journalists related to combining the organizational cultures of the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio newsroom staffs?*

RQ1c. W*hat are the advantages for journalists related to combining the organizational cultures of the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio newsroom staffs?*

RQ1d. *What are the opportunities for journalists related to combining the organizational cultures of the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio newsroom staffs?*

Media scholars have identified several commonly shared, but sometimes conflicting values of U.S. journalists, among them public service and immediacy (Deuze, 2005; Pavlik, 2013; Ward, 2005). As an independent news organization, the Beacon published breaking news stories, but emphasized in-depth reporting that provided context for issues (Ferrucci, 2013). However, Beacon editors also considered timeliness and whether other news media have covered an event when deciding whether to pursue a story or display it prominently, Ferrucci noted. Freivogel (2009) described "hard-hitting analysis" as a style of "watchdog journalism" (p. 8) closely related to investigative reporting. Both forms of journalism are among the Beacon's "core responsibilities and greatest opportunities for serving our region" (p. 9), she wrote.

Researchers have previously examined readers' content preferences to quantify measures of quality journalism. For example, Bogart (1989) and Stone and Boudreau (1995) found similar preference patterns in some of the first quantitative studies of what newspaper readers wanted in their news. Notably, both Bogart and Stone and Boudreau mixed geographic categories (local, national, international) with specific types of content (e.g., sports, business, entertainment, health, science). More recently, the Pew Research Center summarized 165 national surveys to conclude that Americans' news preferences had remained steady over the previous 20 years

(Robinson, 2007). Technology has allowed researchers to track readers' online news preferences, which sometimes conflicts with newspaper readers' reported preferences. For example, Wu and Bechtel (2002) examined daily traffic on *The New York Times* website to find that international politics, education and science/technology were highly correlated with online news use in general, while domestic politics, weather, and accident/disaster news were negatively correlated with website use. Tewksbury (2003) found online users read public affairs (i.e., world news, politics) articles far less frequently than members of the print audience.

Other researchers have used objective measures of content they argued were indicators of quality and compared them with readership measures such as newspaper circulation. Lacy and Fico (1991) analyzed content measures such as ratios of staff reporting to wire service copy and backgrounder/interpretive to spot news stories. An index based on their quantitative measures of quality predicted 22% of the variance in newspaper circulation. In an analysis of newspaper coverage of suburban Denver and Detroit, Lacy and Sohn (1990) coded news content as suburban government, sports, business, police and fire, cultural and social events, and editorials. The amount of coverage was correlated with circulation in those suburbs. Lacy (1992) posited that investment in coverage as determined by reader preferences for quality journalism would lead to improvements in financial measures such as circulation. Several studies have provided evidence to support this relationship (Blankenburg, 1989; Chen, Thorson, & Lacy, 2005; Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2004; Pardue, 2004). A more recent study based on 12 years of data from a single newspaper found newsroom investment was a predictor of online advertising revenue (Tang, Sridhar, Thorson, & Mantrala, 2011).

Meyer (2009) suggested that a relationship exists between a news organization's

credibility and its financial robustness. Analyzing data from 21 newspapers that had been owned

by Knight Ridder, he found credibility explained 31 percent of the variation in how robust the

newspapers' market penetration was in their communities. The strength of this influence model

"is that it provides a business rationale for social responsibility" (p. 26). By contrast, many news

owners responded to the challenges of online competition by cutting costs to harvest short-term

profits. One such way to cut costs was to end circulation in outlying communities. This had the

effect of reducing a newspaper's influence, thus lessening its long-term viability. In this model,

the capacity of a news organization to produce journalism is both an indicator of the quality of

the news content it produces and its credibility.

These issues of quality reporting, timeliness, and influence suggest this research question:

RQ2. *Has the merger improved the quality of news content posted on the St. Louis Public Radio website compared with news content posted on the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio websites before the merger?*

Converged Newsrooms

The combined St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio staff produces news content

both for broadcast on the radio and for posting online. Robinson (2011) observed that

journalists' practices are influenced both by the technology they use and by the media platforms

on which their work is disseminated. Even when journalists from different media are integrated

into a common space, they can prefer to work with the colleagues who share their backgrounds.

Furthermore, they express a need for proper training before they can produce news content for a

new medium. However, Robinson concluded that integrated physical space and a virtual

journalistic space formed through the use of technology were factors that are shared by

newsrooms that are most successful at convergence. When the Beacon was an independent news

organization, its journalists used technology such as instant messaging to communicate (Ferrucci, 2013). Although some editors worked daily in offices shared with a public television station, other journalists often reported on events from home (Ferrucci, 2013).

Dupagne and Garrison (2006) studied cooperation between three news organizations—a daily metro newspaper, a television station, and a news website—owned by the same parent company. Despite differences in organizational cultures, the news organizations were able to successfully share resources and coordinate coverage of community events. Journalists reported that "their core work" was "generally unchanged" (p. 250), but they also said they had become more versatile in their skills. The television station benefited especially from the resources of the newspaper, particularly its research library and staff of photojournalists.

In a study of convergence in four U.S. media markets, Singer (2004b) concluded that journalists supported varying levels of collaboration between online, broadcast, and print news staffs as beneficial to their newsrooms, their own careers, and to the public. However, they were concerned, at least temporarily, about differing organizational cultures and journalistic standards between the newsrooms (Singer, 2004a; Singer, 2004b). Indeed, Singer (2004b) noted, "Identification with a particular medium is part of formative and professional processes for many journalists" (p. 840). Ultimately, journalists in converged newsrooms usually gained respect for the work of their colleagues from other types of news media (Singer, 2004a; Singer, 2004b).

Based on research about media convergence, these research questions are proposed:

RQ3a. *What are the challenges for St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio journalists related to the production of news content for broadcast and digital platforms?*

RQ3b. *What are the concerns for St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio journalists related to the production of news content for broadcast and digital platforms?*

RQ3c. *What are the advantages for St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio journalists related to the production of news content for broadcast and digital platforms?*

RQ3d. *What are the opportunities for St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio journalists related to the production of news content for broadcast and digital platforms?*

Not-for-profit News Organizations

Not-for-profit news organizations, like their for-profit counterparts, must find financial support for their journalism. Powers and Yaros (2012) noted that while nonprofit news organizations are not dependent on advertisers and investors, they still "face pressure to find sustainable sources of revenue" (p. 43). News nonprofits have relied primarily on support from foundations and other large donors (Holcomb, 2013; Konieczna & Robinson, 2013; Power & Yaros, 2012). Many of these foundations are prepared to fund nonprofit news organizations for the long term, but they expect that these journalists will continue to innovate (Holcomb, 2013). Sustainability is a goal for St. Louis Public Radio, which has raised money to help support the combined news organization for its first five years (Nelson, 2013). However, finding an ongoing revenue stream is a priority, with a goal to become self-sufficient by the sixth year.

The Beacon was one of several nonprofit news organizations that were founded in the past decade during several years of staff reductions at metro daily newspapers (Konieczna & Robinson, 2013). For the most part, these news nonprofits publish their work online. They have adopted innovative practices such as blogs, social media, and data visualization. They engage in a form of civic journalism, in which journalists connect with and gain trust from the community to improve their reporting. However, they often adopt structures similar to traditional news organizations, which have viewed themselves as trustees for the public without necessarily seeking citizen participation in gathering the news. Konieczna and Robinson concluded that

"news nonprofits are indeed based on the traditional model of trustee journalism, but that they

also wish to redefine the relationship between journalists and citizens" (p. 15).

The merger brought Beacon journalists into the University of Missouri System, which

owns the license for St. Louis Public Radio. Nonetheless, St. Louis Public Radio will rely on

support from donors and sponsors to fund its news operations (Singer, 2013). Applying the

influence model (Meyer, 2009), it could be argued that a greater capacity to produce news

content ultimately would lead to increased financial support from the community.

Based on these studies about not-for-profit news organizations, the following research

questions are proposed:

> **RQ4a.** *Does the ownership structure influence how St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio journalists approach their work?*
>
> **RQ4b.** *What is the relationship between the donors who fund the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio news staff and the journalism produced by the combined organization?*

Method

To explore our research questions, we conducted a semi-structured interview with the

editor of St. Louis Public Radio and conducted a quantitative content analysis of news content

posted on the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio websites before and after the merger.

Semi-structured Interview

As a research technique, semi-structured interviews can help scholars develop and

support theory in mass communication and other social science fields (Brennen, 2013; Creswell,

2009). Brennen (2013) noted that interviews can provide researchers a more complete

understanding of a topic. Based on our research questions, we developed an interview script for

the interview with Freivogel and for future interviews of other St. Louis Public Radio journalists and stakeholders. A semi-structured interview allows for follow-up and open-ended questions based on answers to queries prepared in advance. This approach allowed for more in-depth exploration of questions related to the merger of the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio.

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method, and qualitative research by its nature can be subjective. Creswell (2009) and Yanow (2009) observed that numerous researchers in organizational and other social sciences have brought their related professional experience to qualitative studies. However, these researchers should prevent preconceived views from influencing the investigation (Brennen, 2013) and provide a reflection that explains any biases they might bring to a study (Creswell, 2009). In this case, the lead researcher is a St. Louis native and longtime newspaper and online journalist. We conducted a quantitative content analysis in part to mitigate any bias that might exist in the qualitative portion of the study.

Content Analysis

In our content analysis, we compared news stories posted in two-week periods before the merger on the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio websites and in a two-week period after the merger on the combined St. Louis Public Radio website. Our intent was to provide quantitative data to further explore our research questions related to the quality of the journalism produced by the two news organizations before and after the merger, as well as the use of multimedia by a converged news organization. We conceptualized variables and categories based in part on previous studies that attempted to measure the quality of news content (Bogart, 1989; Lacy & Fico, 1991; Lacy & Sohn, 1990; Stone & Boudreau, 1995).

We selected stories from before the merger posted on the two websites from October 6 to

19, 2013. Stories from after the merger were posted from February 23 to March 8, 2014. These time periods may have resulted in a slightly larger number of sports-related stories than were usually posted on either site because the pre-merger period included a week when the St. Louis Cardinals were in the National League baseball playoffs and the post-merger period included a week of the 2014 Winter Olympics. Stories from the St. Louis Beacon site were collected by clicking on the Issues & Politics, Arts & Life, InnovationSTL, Health & Science, Voices, and Events tabs, clicking through "next page" links to our time period, and saving and printing story pages. Stories already collected from another section were disregarded. URLs were saved in a spreadsheet so coders could return to the story pages for clarification when necessary. We used a similar procedure for collecting stories from the St. Louis Public Radio website. However, all stories posted were found by clicking on a "More News" tab rather than section tabs. This procedure resulted in a purposive sample ($N = 307$) of stories, with the largest number ($n = 126$) from the combined site after the merger, followed by stories collected from the Beacon site ($n = 116$), with the smallest number ($n = 65$) from the pre-merger St. Louis Public Radio site.

This analysis had one independent variable, *story group,* with three categories: stories from the St. Louis Beacon site before the merger, stories from the St. Louis Public Radio site before the merger, and stories from the combined St. Louis Public Radio site after the merger.

We had 11 dependent variables. A second researcher reviewed 31 randomly selected articles in the sample to check for intercoder reliability of these measures.

Story length. This variable was determined by using word processing software to count the number of words in the story. Bylines, text indicating when a story was posted or updated, captions, and story tags were not included in this count. Story lengths then were classified into

five categories with approximately the same number of items: *shortest*, those 240 words or less; *short*, 241 to 415 words; *medium length*, 416 to 631 words; *long*, 632 to 976 words; and *longest*, 977 words or more. The coders substantially agreed about story length (*Cohen's kappa* = .919).

Story type. This variable included six categories. *Spot news* referred to coverage of breaking news events. Reporters could cover spot news based on news releases, news conferences, or on-the-scene reporting of meetings, trials, or breaking news such as fires or crimes. News organizations typically wouldn't have an advantage over competitors in covering spot news. *Background/interpretive* referred to coverage of news or ongoing issues that provided more context or original reporting than spot news. Competitors could cover a story in this way, but the result would not necessarily be similar. Profiles of newsmakers, artists, and entertainers also could be categorized as background/interpretive. *Investigative/enterprise* referred to stories that were the result of the initiative of a journalist or journalists in a news organization. Such stories wouldn't necessarily be dependent on ongoing news events. In any case, it rarely would be possible for another news organization to duplicate this type of story. *Commentary* referred to stories that primarily offered opinions about the news or public issues. This category included regular features such as editor's letters. Many of these stories were labeled as "commentary." *Calendar/listings* referred to stories that primarily provided time and date information and perhaps a description of an event. *Aggregation* referred to stories that primarily provided links to and descriptions of other coverage on the Beacon or St. Louis Public Radio websites or elsewhere online. Intercoder reliability was acceptable (*Cohen's kappa* = .71).

Story source. This variable included three categories. *Staff* referred to stories written by journalists employed directly by the Beacon or St. Louis Public Radio. This was determined

by referring to staff lists on either site or by checking the profile pages of writers linked from

their bylines on the St. Louis Public Radio site. *Wire or staff/wire* referred to stories from The

Associated Press or another news service. Such stories would be available to other news

organizations that subscribe to the news service. Stories credited to The Associated Press were

coded in this category even if they also were credited to a staff writer. *Contributor* referred to

stories written by freelance writers or other individuals not directly employed by the Beacon or

St. Louis Public Radio. Many commentaries were included in this category. The two coders

completely agreed on this measure (*Cohen's kappa* = 1).

Content type. This variable included 10 categories. Stories were coded based on

whether the text could primarily be described as: *government/politics*; *crimes/courts/police/fire*,

which included individual news events and issue stories related to these public institutions;

education, which included primary, secondary, and higher education; *arts/culture*, including

stories about arts and entertainment events and institutions; *social events,* including festivals and

fundraisers; *business/economy,* including news about individual businesses or the general

economic environment; *science,* including scientific research and advances; *health,* including

individual and public health, medical institutions, and health insurance; *sports*, including

professional teams such as the St. Louis Cardinals, college teams, and high school teams; and

other, which included human interest profiles and stories that could not be classified in any of the

preceding categories. The coders substantially agreed on this variable (*Cohen's kappa* = .851).

Story geography/location. This variable included five categories and was defined as the

primary location of the story. For event stories, this would be determined by where the event

took place. For more complex issue stories, this would be determined by who is affected by the

story. We categorized stories as locally as feasible. For example, a story that could be categorized as a St. Louis region story would not also be categorized as a Missouri state news story. *St. Louis region* referred to stories within the St. Louis metropolitan statistical area, which comprises St. Louis city, St. Louis County, and several other nearby counties in Missouri and Illinois. *Missouri state news* referred to stories primarily within Missouri that could not be coded as St. Louis region. *Illinois state news* referred to stories primarily within Illinois that could not be coded as St. Louis region. *National* referred to stories primarily about other states or the federal government, except when the emphasis was how issues identified in the story affect people or institutions in the St. Louis area, Missouri, or Illinois. *World* referred to stories primarily about other countries, except when the emphasis was how issues identified in the story affect people or institutions in the St. Louis area, Missouri, or Illinois. *Other/no geography* referred to stories that did not have a geographic location or could not be placed in a single category. For example, a roundup of news from multiple locations would be categorized as other/no geography. Intercoder reliability was acceptable (*Cohen's kappa* = .713).

Multimedia items. We counted several types of multimedia items embedded in stories: *photos, graphics, audio clips, video clips, other multimedia items,* and *total multimedia items.* *Other multimedia items* was defined as multimedia items such as embedded documents that could not be placed in another category. Total multimedia items was determined by adding the numbers of elements counted for the preceding multimedia variables. For all of these variables, we only included multimedia elements that were embedded to the story; we excluded hyperlinks in text to such elements that were intended to point readers to other stories or pages on the websites. The two coders completely agreed about these measures (*Cohen's kappa* = 1).

Findings

In this section, we report a summary of a semi-structured interview with Freivogel and results of our attempt to measure quantitative indicators of news content quality.

Semi-structured Interview

The interview with Freivogel occurred after a morning news meeting in a third-floor glass-walled conference room adjacent to the St. Louis Public Radio newsroom. Freivogel described her role of editor as St. Louis Public Radio. In her new position, she manages news operations for both types of media, radio and the Web. She acknowledged that it may be "difficult for people outside this building" to understand how the two news organizations have quickly combined into one. "They so identify things by medium, maybe. They so thought of us as two separate organizations."

She described herself as one of three co-founders of the Beacon. The nonprofit news website was launched in April 2008, but planning for it began in 2006, about a year after Freivogel, her husband, and Beacon co-founder Robert Duffy took buyouts from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch.* After the staff reductions at the newspaper, the Beacon founders realized fewer reporters would be covering the St. Louis region. They believed something should be done to maintain enough reporting about the community. "People kept trying to pigeonhole that we had left the Post-Dispatch and this was a challenge to that. We didn't see it that way at all." Indeed, they realized a small website couldn't be a competitor to the metro newspaper.

Combined staffs. Freivogel addressed the challenges and concerns for the combined organization, describing producing news for both radio and the Web as more complex. "Before, we were playing tic-tac-toe; now, it's like a Rubik's cube." With "the added dimension of

medium," the journalists not only must consider what stories should be covered, they also must consider "what's the appropriate way to do that on the air, on the website, on social media." The combined staff is organized on a beat system, with reporters responsible for specific news topics. However, staff members have strengths in different kinds of media. "It makes it an interesting time to be here. . . . It forces us to stop and think about these things. By its nature, it disrupts the old routines we were in." However, the merger also has resulted in advantages and opportunities. "We are able to reach more people in more ways with our work." Freivogel described a content snapshot of a week before the merger, when the staffs of the two news organizations produced a combined 59 stories. In a one-week period a month after the merger, "We did the same number of stories, 59, but there was no duplication in what we were covering." Furthermore, articles on the post-merger site included data visualizations and other elements that improved the storytelling. "We had pretty quickly made some big strides."

Quality reporting. As for whether the merger has improved the quality of journalism produced by the staff, Freivogel said, "We were insisting on quality before." For example, while the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio journalists haven't covered sports as game coverage or crime as police blotter items, they do report on the topics as public issues. Since the merger, a larger staff has allowed reporters to spend more time on complex stories. For example, a reporter investigating the use of certain drugs in lethal injections of prisoners condemned to the death penalty in Missouri has "had a lot more time to be able to keep digging on this."

Converged newsroom. Elaborating on the production of journalism for a converged news organization, Freivogel described this as a "big challenge that we hope to tackle." She acknowledged that in this aspect, some staff journalists "are more active than others."

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Furthermore, "another challenge is just time, figuring out how to use your time well and be in all of these places." At the same time, producing news for radio, the Web, and social media has allowed the staff to reach audiences in different ways. For example, before the merger, a St. Louis Public Radio journalist had many responsibilities, but now she "is able to really focus much more intensely on social media."

Ownership structure. Before the merger, Beacon employees worked for a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. By contrast, all St. Louis Public Radio journalists are employees of the University of Missouri. However, Freivogel noted that for her it was an essential condition of the merger that the combined news organization would be free to cover the news without interference from the university or the state. So far, that has been the case. "I think our lethal injection coverage raised questions about what state officials are doing," she said. Like other public broadcasters, St. Louis Public Radio relies on donors and sponsors for support. Before the merger, the Beacon also was funded by donors. In either case, Freivogel has been asked whether donors have any influence over news coverage. "I say which donors, because they don't agree with each other." She noted that newspapers face a similar question about their independence. "People wondered whether the advertisers exerted influence." As an editor, she makes it clear to donors that they should not expect control over coverage, but that they should expect high-quality journalism. "The integrity of the news operation is the absolutely most important thing."

Content Analysis

We examined differences in stories between the St. Louis Beacon website in a two-week period before the merger, the St. Louis Public Radio site in that same two-week period, and the combined St. Louis Public Radio site in a two-week period after the merger.

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We conducted Pearson's chi-square tests to determine whether there were significant differences in story lengths (*shortest, short, medium, long, longest*), types of stories (*spot news, background/interpretive, commentary, calendar/listings, aggregation, investigative/enterprise*), sources (*staff, wire or staff/wire, contributor*), content type (*government/politics, arts/culture, business/economy, education, crime/courts/police/fire, health, sports, science, social events, other*), and geography/location (*St. Louis region, Missouri state news, Illinois state news, nation, world, other/no geography*). Chi-square values are reported in Tables 1 through 5. Table 6 shows the average numbers of photos, audio clips, and other multimedia items on the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio websites before and after the merger. We conducted analysis of variance tests to determine whether statistically significant differences existed in the number of various multimedia items; F values for the ANOVAs are reported in Table 6.

Story lengths. The difference in story lengths (see Table 1) was statistically significant ($p < .001$). The St. Louis Public Radio pre-merger stories were much shorter than the pre-merger Beacon stories and the stories on the combined post-merger site. This finding supports a conclusion that the addition of the Beacon staff substantially increased the volume of news as measured by story length on the combined St. Louis Public Radio site.

Story type. We found a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) in the types of stories covered by the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio before the merger and the combined site after the merger (see Table 2). Nearly half of the stories on the Beacon site before the merger could be categorized as background/interpretive, reflecting the depth and context provided by Beacon reporters. By contrast, 34% of the stories on the pre-merger St. Louis Public Radio could be categorized as background/interpretive. The percentage of background/

interpretive stories climbed to 56% on the combined site after the merger, supporting a

conclusion that the addition of the Beacon reporters substantially strengthened the quality of

news stories on the St. Louis Public Radio website. This was also reflected in a declining

percentage of spot news stories on the St. Louis Public Radio website from before to after the

merger. On the Beacon site, 12% of stories were categorized as spot news, compared with 48%

of St. Louis Public Radio stories before the merger and 18% on the combined post-merger site.

Before the merger, nearly 1 in 5 of the Beacon stories were commentaries. By contrast, the St.

Louis Public Radio site included only one commentary in the pre-merger sample. Afterward,

about 1 in 10 stories posted were commentaries. The Beacon site included a number of

aggregated stories with links to other news coverage, and the combined staff increased its

emphasis on these kinds of stories after the merger. Before the merger, about 14% of the stories

provided by the Beacon staff and 12% of St. Louis Public Radio stories were primarily calendar

listings or short stories about events, primarily from arts or cultural organizations. After the

merger, much of the arts coverage shifted into the background/interpretive category, with more

context-filled stories accompanying notices of arts and cultural events. This supports a

conclusion that the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio, which both already emphasized arts and

cultural reporting, were able to strengthen this coverage further with the combined staff.

Story source. We found a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) in the source of

the stories posted on the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio websites before and after the merger

(see Table 3). The vast majority of stories in all three groups were written by journalists

employed by the Beacon or St. Louis Public Radio. However, about 14% of stories posted on

the St. Louis Public Radio site before the merger originated or included material from The

Associated Press. None of the stories on the combined site was credited to The Associated Press. More than 1 in 5 of stories posted on the before-merger Beacon site were written by contributors, with many of these items arts features written by freelancers or commentaries with a "Special to the Beacon" credit with the byline. The combined site reduced its use of stories written by contributors to 14%. This finding supports a conclusion that the merger produced a strengthened news organization that could rely more heavily on its staff journalists.

Content type. We found a statistically significant difference between the three story groups in the types of news content (See Table 4). The two most frequently posted types of stories were government/politics and arts/culture news. The amount of government/politics stories did not change by more than a few percentage points from the amount of stories posted by the two news organizations before the merger to the proportion of stories on the combined site. This was the largest category for all three story groups. The percentage of arts/culture stories dropped from the amount posted before the merger to the proportion on the combined site. This partly reflected arts/culture stories that were covered by both news organizations before the merger as well as fewer calendar/listings items. The Beacon brought a secondary emphasis on education news to the combined site, and St. Louis Public Radio brought a secondary strength in business/economic news. These findings support a conclusion that the news organizations combined strengths to produce more complete reporting about news in the St. Louis region.

Story geography/location. The difference in the geography or location between the three story groups approached statistical significance (see Table 5). Before the merger, the Beacon strongly emphasized news related to government, politics, and arts and cultural institutions in the St. Louis metro area, primarily St. Louis city and St. Louis County, with 3 in 4

stories in this category. News from the St. Louis region also was the largest category of stories

posted on the pre-merger St. Louis Public Radio site, accounting for about two-thirds of the

articles. However, St. Louis Public Radio put somewhat more emphasis on coverage of the

Missouri state government. Combined, the two news organizations strongly emphasized news

from the St. Louis region or Missouri government news that affected most residents in the

metropolitan area. These findings, although not statistically significant, are consistent with our

conclusion that the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio combined complementary

strengths to cover more types of stories that affected people in the St. Louis region.

Audio clips. The difference in the number of audio clips between the three groups of

stories (see Table 6) was statistically significant ($p < .001$). A Tukey's post-hoc test found a

significant difference in the number of audio clips posted on the pre-merger Beacon site and the

pre-merger St. Louis Public Radio site ($p = .007$), and between the pre-merger Beacon site and

the combined site ($p < .001$). No significant difference was found in the number of audio clips

posted on the St. Louis Public Radio site before or after the merger. This supports a conclusion

that the Beacon journalists were beginning to adapt to the need to produce audio news content.

Photos, graphics, and video clips. We found no statistically significant differences

($p > .1$) between the story groups in the number of photos, graphics, or video clips (see Table 6).

Other multimedia items. The differences in the number of other multimedia items

between the three groups of stories (see Table 6) approached statistical significance ($p = .097$). A

Tukey's post-hoc test found a difference was approaching statistical significance

($p = .085$) in the number of other multimedia items posted on the Beacon website before the

merger and the number posted on the combined site after the merger. A larger number of other

multimedia items was posted on the combined site than on the Beacon site, reflecting a willingness of the combined staff to experiment more with the use of non-traditional multimedia items such as embedded documents. No statistically significant differences were found in the number of other multimedia items posted by St. Louis Public Radio before the merger and those posted by the Beacon before the merger, nor between the pre-merger St. Louis Public Radio site and the combined post-merger website.

Total multimedia items. The differences in the number of total multimedia items between the three story groups (see Table 6) approached statistical significance ($p = .07$). However, a Tukey's post-hoc test found no significant difference between the number of total multimedia items between the two news organizations before the merger or between either of the pre-merger sites and the combined news site after the merger.

Discussion

In our first set of research questions, we considered the task of combining organizational cultures of the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio news staffs. These questions were informed by studies (Daniels & Hollifield, 2002; Gade, 2004; Gade & Perry, 2003) suggesting that journalistic values such as autonomy had hindered past efforts by news organizations to change cultures. Indeed, the merger brought an independent nonprofit news startup into a more formalized university-owned structure. As for challenges and concerns related to this organizational change, Freivogel noted that the merger prompted St. Louis Public Radio journalists to rethink their routines. Our content analysis indicated that the combined staff was adapting quickly to the change. The news organizations had complementary strengths, particularly in government/politics, arts/culture, business/economy, and education coverage

areas. An advantage of the merger was that while the staff could maintain a solid capacity to cover stories in the St. Louis region, it also was able to increase its coverage of statewide issues in Missouri.

Our next research question related directly to quality of news coverage by the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio staffs before and after the merger. It was informed by previous research identifying quantitative indicators of news quality and the assertion by Meyer (2009) that capacity to cover the news influences quality and a news organization's credibility. Although both sites had posted numerous backgrounder/interpretive stories and relied heavily on staff reporting before the merger, these quantitative measures of news quality improved afterward. As Freivogel noted, a larger staff has more time and flexibility to cover important news. After the merger, the majority of articles on the St. Louis Public Radio site could be categorized as backgrounder/interpretive. Fewer than 1 in 5 articles could be categorized as spot news coverage. In particular, crime, police, and courts articles emphasized public issues related to this content type rather than individual breaking news events. We also noted a significant reduction in the proportion of stories that provided only descriptions and calendar information about arts, cultural, or other events. After the merger, these stories routinely included more context such as interviews with artists. St. Louis Public Radio supplemented its pre-merger staff coverage with articles from The Associated Press. After the merger, no wire articles were posted on the combined site. For these reasons, we conclude that the combined staff has begun to improve the quality of the journalism it produces.

Our third set of research questions concerned the production of news for radio, Web, and social media. Freivogel noted that this remains a concern for a staff with backgrounds in

different media. However, noting an advantage or opportunity resulting from the merger, she

also observed that a larger staff has allowed one St. Louis Public Radio journalist to devote her

time almost exclusively to reaching audiences on social media. We found initial progress in the

use of multimedia items, particularly audio clips, on the combined website. The staff also began

to experiment with multimedia items such as embedded documents. Nonetheless, the staff could

continue to progress in its use of photographs and other multimedia items. These findings were

consistent with earlier research (Dupagne & Garrison, 2006; Singer, 2004b) showing varying

levels of success in producing multimedia content in converged newsrooms.

Our final pair of research questions related to the not-for-profit structure of ownership by

a university and the relationship between donors and St. Louis Public Radio. Freivogel noted

that St. Louis Public Radio insists on its integrity and independence in covering the news, but

that financial supporters have a right to expect high-quality journalism.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has its limitations. We have only begun to explore the views of St. Louis

Public Radio journalists and stakeholders. We intend to conduct further semi-structured

interviews in a second phase of this research. It also might be challenging to conclude based on

a quantitative content analysis that the combined news staff's quality of coverage has improved.

Although we acknowledge that views of quality can be subjective, we based our analysis on

previous research about indicators of news quality. Future research could examine audience

perceptions of the quality of reporting by the St. Louis Public Radio staff, the impact of the

journalism produced by the news organization on public policy, and whether this investment in

higher-quality reporting influences financial support by donors in the region. Finally, this is a

case study based on the combination of two news organizations in one metropolitan area.

Scholars also should investigate news collaborations in other communities.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored the merger of the St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio news staffs. Based on a semi-structured interview with the editor of St. Louis Public Radio and a content analysis of articles posted on the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio websites, we concluded the staff had begun to combine complementary strengths to increase its capacity to cover news that was important in the St. Louis region. We found improvements on quantitative indicators of news quality. The combined staff also showed progress in use of multimedia items such as photographs, embedded documents, and especially audio clips. Even under ownership by a public higher education institution, St. Louis Public Radio relies on support from donors and sponsors. Nonetheless, journalists insist on their independence to cover the news, but believe donors should expect high-quality reporting.

Challenged by technological and economic changes, commercial news organizations have reduced the number of journalists they employ. Nonprofit news organizations have been established as an alternative to provide more journalism in these communities, but they have faced their own financial challenges. The merger of the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio could exemplify a means of providing communities with high-quality reporting. If, as Meyer's influence model (Meyer, 2009) suggests, the addition of Beacon journalists to the St. Louis Public Radio staff succeeds in attracting a larger audience and long-term financial support, this merger could be a model for sustainable journalism in other communities.

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Table 1. Story length

	St. Louis Beacon before merger (*n = 116*)	**St. Louis Public Radio before merger (*n* = 65)**	**Combined website after merger (*n* = 126)**
Shortest (0-240 words)	18%	43%	10%
Short (241-415 words)	11%	32%	22%
Medium length (416-631 words)	21%	14%	22%
Long (632-976 words)	21%	6%	27%
Longest (at least 977 words)	29%	5%	19%

$\chi_2(8) = 57.878, p < .001$

Table 2. Story type

	St. Louis Beacon before merger (*n = 116*)	**St. Louis Public Radio before merger (*n* = 65)**	**Combined website after merger (*n* = 126)**
Backgrounder/ interpretive	49%	34%	56%
Spot news	12%	48%	18%
Commentary	19%	2%	10%
Aggregation	5%	2%	9%
Calendar/listings	14%	12%	3%
Enterprise/ investigative	1%	3%	2%
Other	0	0	2%

$\chi_2(12) = 57.378, p < .001$

Table 3. Story source

	St. Louis Beacon before merger (*n = 116)*	**St. Louis Public Radio before merger (*n = 65)***	**Combined website after merger (*n = 126)***
Staff	77%	86%	86%
Wire or staff/wire	1%	14%	0
Contributor	22%	0	14%

$\chi_2(4) = 43.856, p < .001$

Table 4. Story content type

	St. Louis Beacon before merger (*n = 116)*	**St. Louis Public Radio before merger (*n = 65)***	**Combined website after merger (*n = 126)***
Government/politics	29%	35%	32%
Arts/culture	28%	25%	20%
Business/economy	3%	14%	14%
Education	10%	6%	10%
Crime/courts/ police/fire	5%	12%	8%
Health	8%	2%	7%
Sports	6%	0	2%
Science	3%	3%	0
Social events	5%	3%	0
Other	3%	0	6%

$\chi_2(18) = 36.567, p = .006$

Table 5. Story geography

	St. Louis Beacon before merger (*n = 116*)	St. Louis Public Radio before merger (*n = 65*)	Combined website after merger (*n = 126*)
St. Louis region	75%	66%	62%
Missouri (state news)	8%	23%	23%
Illinois (state news)	2%	3%	2%
Nation	10%	6%	9%
World	5%	0	4%
Other/no geography	1%	2%	1%

$\chi_2(10) = 15.885, p = .1$

Table 6. Multimedia items

	St. Louis Beacon before merger (*n = 116*)	St. Louis Public Radio before merger (*n = 65*)	Combined website after merger (*n = 126*)
Photos	*mean = 1.7, sd = 2.2*	*mean = 2.1, sd = 2.9*	*mean = 2, sd = 2.4*
Graphics	*	*	*
Audio clips**	*	*mean = .4, sd = .6*	*mean = .4, sd = 1*
Video clips	*	*	*
Other multimedia***	*	*mean = .1, sd = .5*	*mean = .1, sd = .4*
Total multimedia***	*mean = 1.9, sd = 2.2*	*mean = 2.7, sd = 3.1*	*mean = 2.6, sd = 2.9*

*Mean number of items was less than .1. ** p < .001 *** p < .1*
Photos: $F(2,304) = .633, p = .532$
Graphics: $F(2,304) = .039, p = .961$
Audio clips: $F(2,304) = 8.779, p < .001$
Video clips: $F(2,304) = .076, p = .927$
Other multimedia: $F(2,304) = 2.352, p = .097$
Total multimedia: $F(2,304) = 2.687, p = .07$