

Doing It for Themselves: Striking Newswriters Publish the Castlegar *Citizen*, 2000-2005

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Abstract: The Castlegar *Citizen*, a strike newspaper published in Castlegar, B.C., from 2000 until 2005, is presented as a case study of newswriters publishing while involved in a labour dispute with their employer. Previous experiences in publishing strike newspapers in various countries are examined, with the elements essential to their success being identified as 1) a will on the part of newswriters and their unions to oppose increasingly powerful ownership groups, and 2) the support of local community members, including advertisers. These conditions were seen to be present in the example of the Castlegar *Citizen*, and it was only its small size that led to its closing, when staff members began to leave for other endeavours.

Résumé : Le *Citizen* de Castlegar, un journal de grève publié à Castlegar, C.-B., entre l'an 2000 et 2005, est présenté comme un cas d'employés du secteur des nouvelles produisant un produit par eux-mêmes pendant un conflit avec leur employeur. Des cas semblables dans d'autres pays sont examinés, identifiant les éléments essentiels à leur succès, comme un testament de la part des travailleurs du secteur des nouvelles et de leur syndicat pour combattre les puissants groupes de propriétaires, et le support local des membres de la communauté, en incluant les commanditaires. Ces conditions semblent avoir été présentes dans l'exemple du *Citizen* de Castlegar. Le journal a cessé d'être publié seulement à cause de nombre limité d'employés, qui ont commencé à quitter pour d'autres opportunités.

Keywords: Newspaper publishing; Ownership (concentration/competition)

Introduction

Newswriters have an advantage over unionists in other sectors of the economy when their livelihood is interrupted by a strike or lockout. Unlike most manufac-

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Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 31 (2006) 581-598

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turing industries, where access to elaborate means of production is essential to continuing the enterprise during a labour disruption, and thus control of the work process lies with management, the newspaper business is mainly “knowledge work,” and its physical plant entails mostly printing. As the latter function can often be contracted out to an independent shop, newspaper workers thus have the ability under certain conditions to publish a product of their own. The most important factors determining whether that is possible include community support, including most importantly the support of advertisers, and access to alternative means of printing and distribution. When these conditions are present, journalists and production workers who have gone on strike or been locked out have proven quite capable of publishing their own “strike sheets.” This has been done both in competition with their original publications and, if community support is sufficient to prevent the employer from publishing from behind a picket line, in their absence.

As a result, strike newspapers have been fairly common during labour disputes. Most are short-lived publications designed to help striking or locked out newswriters supplement their usually modest strike pay and to put pressure on their employers to settle the dispute. Some strike newspapers, however, have continued publishing long after the strike or lockout has officially ended. Unknown to many, the highest-circulation dailies in both Canada and the U.K. started as strike sheets, and in the U.S. the Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, *Citizen's Voice* continues to publish 28 years after beginning its life as a strike newspaper. Even in the past decade, strike newspapers started during labour disputes, for example, in Detroit and Seattle have proven vital to telling the union side of those stories, maintaining union solidarity, and supplementing the incomes of union workers.

This article examines the phenomenon of strike newspapers in general and the five-year publishing life of a British Columbia strike newspaper, the *Castlegar Citizen*, in particular. Primary sources are canvassed, in the form of interviews with former *Citizen* staff members, and secondary sources are surveyed, by analyzing comparative situations in the literature, in an attempt to determine why strike newspapers are started and why they prosper or fail.

Background

The highest-circulation daily newspaper in the world today began its life as a strike sheet in England known as the *Daily Herald*, although both physically and politically its present shape would be barely recognizable to its creators. The *Herald* was born during a 1911 strike by London printers, who were locked out at newspapers across the city after demanding a 50-hour work week. As a 1925 history of the newspaper by one of its founders noted, the *Herald's* origins were modest. “It was the smallest ‘daily’ ever seen; it had four pages only—that is to say, it was one sheet folded, and it measured thirteen inches by eight and a half” (Lansbury, 1925, pp. 44-45). But from this meagre beginning grew a powerful voice for labour. The Depression of the 1930s proved the boost in popularity the *Herald* needed, and by 1933 it was the world's top-selling newspaper, with an audited daily circulation of two million copies. Advertisers, however, never sup-

ported the socialist newspaper in a fashion commensurate with its circulation, and after World War II the *Daily Herald's* popularity waned.

In 1960, Oldhams publishing house prevailed on the unions to relinquish ownership of the daily in a vain attempt to broaden its appeal. The bid failed, however, and the following year Oldhams was taken over by the Mirror Group, whose flagship tabloid was also a staunch backer of the Labour party and Britain's best-selling daily. After extensive market research, the *Daily Herald* was relaunched by the Mirror Group in 1964 as the *Sun*, a broadsheet that was "designed to tap into the lifestyle changes of the 60s—the rise of the young and upwardly-mobile, including career-oriented women" (Douglas, 2004). Still it lagged the market, until being sold in 1969 to Rupert Murdoch of Australia, who converted it into a sensational tabloid with a focus on sex, sport, and sensational news. Today the *Sun* circulates 3.2 million copies daily, but ironically its success under Murdoch has been due in large part to its conservative, anti-union stance, and Murdoch helped lead the newspaper charge out of Fleet Street in the 1980s to non-union operations across the Thames (Douglas, 2004).

Canada's largest-circulation daily newspaper similarly originated as a strike sheet, although it was able to achieve its success without straying as far from its roots. Most histories of the Canadian newspaper industry gloss over the fact that the *Toronto Star* began its life as a strike newspaper, instead focusing on its ascent as a profit machine and a crusader for social justice under the stewardship of long-time publisher Joseph Atkinson, which began in 1899. Fetherling, however, notes that the *Star* was given birth seven years earlier as "the strike sheet of local printers who had been locked out of the *News*" (Fetherling, 1990, p. 97). Although the Toronto newspaper unions were never subsequently able to publish a strike sheet due to employer solidarity in collective bargaining, unions in smaller Ontario centres have on occasion published during labour disputes in competition with their employers.

In 1994, workers at the 23,000-circulation *Oshawa Times* went on strike after owner Thomson Newspapers announced plans to lay off 75% of the daily's staff and reduce it to thrice-weekly publication. Less than a month later, Thomson closed the 123-year-old paper, citing \$1.8 million in losses over the previous four years. That prompted 60 *Times* workers to begin publishing a strike newspaper, the twice-weekly *Oshawa Independent*, which was described as "essentially a desktop publishing operation" (Cobb, 1994). The *Independent* folded after only nine months because, according to one account, it failed to get the support of local investors (Alnwick, 2001). In 1998, workers at the daily *St. Catharines Standard* went on strike for the first time in 107 years after owner Southam Newspapers demanded a two-tiered wage system, with new employees being paid at a lower rate than those already on staff. Southam's new controlling shareholder, Conrad Black, who had a long history of taking a hard line against unions, told the company's annual meeting that year that unions "have killed a score or more of newspapers in Canada with the loss of many thousands of jobs. We are determined that they won't kill ours" (McCarten, 1998). In response, CEP members published

their own weekly newspaper, the *Independent*, for the duration of the labour dispute (CBCUnlocked, 2005).

In British Columbia, publication of the *Vancouver Express* strike newspaper twice during the 1970s helped swing the balance of power in the favour of newsworkers in labour disputes with Pacific Press, a holding company formed in 1957 to publish the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Province*. The *Express* was conceived during a three-month strike at Pacific Press in 1970 and immediately proved a success. The editor of the *Express*, Mike Tytherleigh, had been managing editor of the upstart daily the *Vancouver Times* when it folded in 1965 after challenging the dominance of the Pacific Press dailies in Vancouver for almost a year. From that experience, he realized the advantages of new offset printing technology, and he quickly assembled an editorial team to publish a first edition while local union leadership of the Newspaper Guild (TNG) sought financing from its international headquarters. The myriad of unions at Pacific Press, which bargained with the company as a “joint council,” had already incorporated their own publishing company after a brief 1967 strike as a contingency plan for the future. Called “Pugstem Publications,” the name was an acronym made up of the first letter from each union: Pressmen’s Union, Guild, Stereotypers, Typographers, Electricians, and Mailers (Edge, 2001). A first press run of 100,000 copies sold out in short order, and *Express* edition sizes grew from an initial 12 pages to 32 pages as advertising sales soared. According to Lautens, a *Vancouver Sun* writer, the success of the *Express* was due to the fact that Vancouver was starved for news and advertising during the three-month absence of both its daily newspapers.

It attracted more advertisers, including department stores, at five dollars a column inch than its production and higgledy-piggledy billing facilities could handle. It distributed only in the metropolitan area, sold 100,000 copies, and made bags of money. From its proceeds dividends were distributed among Pacific Press union members. (Lautens, 1970, p. 34)

The *Express* was resurrected during an eight-month strike in 1978-79 at Pacific Press, but this time it faced opposition from advertising boycotts organized by both the Employers’ Council of B.C. and the Vancouver Board of Trade. Despite that obstacle, the *Express* proved so profitable that strikers had little incentive to accept a contract offer and return to work. Union leaders had to shut down the *Express* on the pretext of a newsprint shortage before sufficient progress could be made at the bargaining table to resolve the dispute (Edge, 2001). In 1974, the *Express* experiment was replicated with similar success in nearby Victoria on Vancouver Island, where a similar joint operating arrangement existed, with corporate owner Victoria Press publishing both the *Victoria Times* and the *Colonist*. According to Beyer, a reporter for the *Times*, the strike sheet was so successful that a contract agreement was reached after a six-month shutdown of Victoria Press when its management heard rumours that the unions were considering buying the *Times* and the *Colonist*. “Eventually, the paper was so profitable that, along with the strike pay, it made enough money to make our paycheques just about equal to those we had enjoyed previously” (Beyer, 2002).

Also on Vancouver Island, workers striking the Comox *Free Press* began publishing the *Independent* as a weekly in September 1994 after owner Thomson Newspapers closed the 103-year-old *Free Press* a month into the labour dispute (Young, 1994). The Victoria-Vancouver Island Newspaper Guild launched a challenge to the closure of the *Free Press* before the provincial Labour Relations Board, claiming unfair labour practices, but the LRB ruled in the company's favour six months later. By then, however, the *Independent* was still being published by union members earning \$200 a week in strike pay, but it folded after Thomson started up a new paper in nearby Nanaimo (Young, 1995).

In southeastern B.C., nine workers at the Hollinger-owned Castlegar *Sun* went on strike for higher wages in late 1999 and four months later began publishing their own weekly strike newspaper, the *Citizen*. According to Swift, the *Citizen's* genesis came from officials at the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers local union office in Vancouver. "CEP dangled the carrot, offering some start-up money and cautious advice about how it had been tried before, usually without success. Far from being deterred, the CEP members dove right in" (Swift, 2003, p. 153). The first edition of the *Citizen* was published on March 10, 2000, and it circulated about 6,000 copies a week for five years before ceasing publication on May 11, 2005 (*CBCUnlocked*, 2005). The case of the *Citizen* will be examined in more detail below after additional examples are elicited.

U.S. strike sheets

Strike newspapers in the United States appear to be published less frequently than in Canada, perhaps due to a lower level of news worker unionization and militancy there. Several noteworthy examples of strike sheets published during recent labour disputes, however, may aid in understanding the variables that contribute to their success or failure. By far the longest-publishing modern strike newspaper is the Wilkes-Barre *Citizen's Voice*, which has been in existence for 28 years. It was started up by 200 workers who walked off the job in 1978 at the *Times Leader*, a 70,000-circulation monopoly daily that had recently been purchased from local ownership by the media conglomerate Capital Cities. The strike officially ended in 1982 when the company had the unions decertified, but by 1986, 140 of the 205 union members who had struck the *Times Leader* in 1978 were working on the *Citizen's Voice* for strike pay. Only 12 had returned to work at the *Times Leader*, which published using mostly replacement workers. During the 1990s, however, support for the *Citizen's Voice* declined, as did circulation, which by 2000 stood at 32,589. The declining support prompted its employee owners to sell the *Citizen's Voice* in 2000 to Scranton-based Times-Shamrock Communications. Ironically, the sale was completed only after employees agreed to contract concessions they had been unwilling to make before going on strike (Moses, 2000). The *Times Leader* case is discussed in further detail in the following section.

The bitter, high-profile strike by 2,000 newswriters at both daily newspapers in Detroit that dragged on for almost four years starting in 1995 saw publication by the union of both a weekly tabloid titled the *Sunday Journal* and a daily online

version of the *Journal* that utilized the emerging technology of the World Wide Web. The strike began in July 1995 when 2,500 workers from six unions walked out after refusing management demands for concessions on work rules. The dailies, which had published from common facilities since a controversial 1989 Joint Operating Agreement (JOA) between the county's two largest newspaper chains, Gannett and Knight-Ridder, continued to publish by bringing in replacement workers from their corporate head offices despite picket line violence. Strikers quickly established their online voice, featuring some of Detroit's most popular journalists, in order to get their side of the story out as the dispute became increasingly acrimonious.

By November, a weekly print version of the *Journal* began production with the aid of a \$500,000 grant from area unions, as initial advertising revenues of \$50,000 covered only about half of its production costs (Tyson, 1996). Within a year, as the strike dragged on into a war of attrition and lawsuits, the *Sunday Journal* was circulating 300,000 copies a week, mostly through free home delivery, but also through sales of about 50,000 on newsstands and 5,000 by mail subscription. Described as "the very model of desktop publishing," the *Sunday Journal* was estimated to be costing the strike-bound *News* and *Free Press* about 200,000 in circulation sales daily (Fitzgerald, 1996). By late 1999, the unions began to settle with the company and return to work, prompting the *Sunday Journal* to cease publication on November 21 after four years of publication.

Exactly a year later, newswriters in Seattle established their own strike publication after about 1,000 unionized employees at the jointly operating *Times* and *Post-Intelligencer* walked out in support of wage demands. Titled the *Union Record*, after a local labour newspaper that published from 1900 until 1928, it began as an online publication and four days later hit the streets as a print tabloid (Stango, 2000). The *Times* and *Post-Intelligencer* continued to publish throughout the strike, which lasted seven weeks, while the *Union Record* published 18 print editions that were distributed free in the Seattle area.

In late 2004, about 200 workers at the Youngstown, Ohio, *Vindicator* went on strike for a pay raise following a four-year wage freeze. The independently owned *Vindicator* continued to publish with assistance from the Newhouse chain, which reportedly offered rich incentives for journalists at its newspapers in New Orleans, Portland, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere to cross picket lines in Youngstown (Loh-Harrist, 2004). On November 24, three days after the strike began, strikers published the first edition of a weekly 50,000-circulation strike newspaper titled the *Valley Voice*, but it only saw publication after one Pennsylvania printer pulled it off its presses and *Vindicator* management threatened unionists with a lawsuit if they published at all ("Valley Voice," 2004). The strike ended after 261 days and the *Valley Voice* ceased publication after circulating about 20,000 copies a week, or about a third of the *Vindicator*'s sales, for the duration of the dispute (*CBCUnlocked*, 2005).

Scholarly research

Scholarly studies of strike newspapers have been rare, with only a few notable examples. The first published account of such an operation that could be found compared the declared objectives of striking newspaper workers in Minnesota against their outcomes by conducting content analysis and audience research. All 29 issues of the St. Paul *Sentinel* strike sheet, which was published in late 1957 and early 1958 during a 49-day strike by members of the Newspaper Guild (TNG), were analyzed by researchers from the School of Journalism at the nearby University of Minnesota, who also surveyed reader reaction to content of the strike sheet. Because the TNG members had set out a list of six explicit objectives for the *Sentinel* before commencing its publication, the researchers were able to compare the intentions of the strikers with the content they produced, and in turn gauge the reaction of readers in what they called a "three-step" study (Jones & Barden, 1959, p. 158). The union goals included widespread distribution, local coverage, a 70% ratio of news content to advertising, balanced coverage of their own dispute, promotion of the annual St. Paul Winter Carnival, and obtaining the major portion of their revenues from classified advertising sales. Only the goal of a 70% news hole went unachieved, as advertising was found to fill slightly more than half of the newspaper due to the pressure to accept classified ads. "In five of six major objectives, the guildsmen realized their goals with considerable exactitude," concluded the researchers (Jones & Barden, 1959, p. 162).

By far the most comprehensive account of such a publication is Keil's 1988 book *On Strike!*, which examined the success of the Wilkes-Barre *Citizen's Voice*. Keil, a University of Louisville sociologist native to the Wilkes-Barre area who was researching a social history of anthracite miners there when the strike began in 1978, started studying the conflict from a framework of class analysis, ultimately conducting more than 300 hours of interviews with more than 100 subjects. His analysis showed that community support was vital to the survival of the *Citizen's Voice* and resulted not only from the historical union strength in the coal mining area, but also from public opposition to the recent change in ownership of the *Times Leader*, which was seen as a threat to local community values. When Capital Cities Communications, Inc. bought the *Times Leader* from local family ownership in May 1978, the Albany-based company was in the process of expanding from a regional chain of television stations to a media conglomerate that would shock the corporate world in 1985 with its purchase of the ABC television network. Established in 1954, Capital Cities went public with a stock market offering in 1966 and purchased its first newspaper three years later in Pontiac, Michigan. It added the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* in 1974 and both dailies in Kansas City in 1977. In all three cities, it won confrontations with newspaper unions, and a similar showdown was expected in pursuit of its declared 15-18% profit target at the *Times Leader* (Keil, 1988).

Capital Cities demanded an open-shop arrangement at the *Times Leader*, under which workers would not have to be union members, and also sought an end to job guarantees for its printers. As negotiations for a new contract proceeded

without progress, Capital Cities openly trained employees from its other newspapers on the *Times Leader* printing equipment in preparation for publishing in the event of a strike. In the summer of 1978, a four-metre fence was erected around the company's property, surveillance cameras were installed, and security guards began to patrol the premises. As a result, when the strike was called and violence erupted on the picket line, the public blamed Capital Cities.

The guards, fences, cameras, and violence were far more than a "public relations disaster." . . . Capital Cities' security measures laid the foundation for a growing belief that the company was the moral equivalent of the coal corporations . . . Capital Cities was seen as corporate evil incarnate. (Keil, 1988, pp. 115-116)

Similarly, according to Keil, the negative public response to the *Times Leader* publishing during the strike ensured that it would suffer both financially and journalistically while the *Citizen's Voice* flourished. The *Times Leader* was portrayed in a "carefully orchestrated ideological campaign" by the unions as a "radically evil presence in local life that threatened the entire community" (Keil, 1988, p. 161). In addition to suffering from the label of "scab paper," the *Times Leader* was portrayed as a threat to local journalism due to the prepackaged news planned by a corporate absentee owner intent on cutting costs and raising profits at the expense of quality. As a result, many local residents boycotted the *Times Leader*, refused to be photographed for its pages, cancelled their subscriptions, and even refused delivery when Capital Cities attempted to maintain advertising rates by delivering copies for free. When the local business community rallied to the defence of the *Times Leader*, urging merchants not to place ads in the *Citizen's Voice*, union members erected "information" picket lines around the businesses that participated in the boycott, convincing them to place ads when shoppers refused to cross.

According to Keil, however, despite the success of the *Citizen's Voice*, the labour showdown in Wilkes-Barre was only a partial victory for the unions because they "allowed Capital Cities to slip off the hook" (Keil, 1988, p. 218). While the unions were able to publish a strike newspaper successfully, Keil pointed to their failure to implement a national strategy to prevent Capital Cities from publishing the *Times Leader* as a turning point in newspaper union history. Putting pressure on national advertisers, who provided the bulk of revenues for the strike-bound *Times Leader*, as well as on Capital Cities investors, might have soundly defeated a major media corporation, Keil concluded. "Had the international unions used the financial weapon, their recent history might not have been a succession of surrenders and defeats, punctuated by an occasional partial victory" (Keil, 1988, p. 219).

Edge's 2001 history of Pacific Press, which published the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province* starting in 1957, concluded that the *Express* strike newspaper published twice during labour disputes during the 1970s not only altered labour relations at the dailies, but also led to the demise of two owning newspaper chains. Both FP Publications, which purchased the *Vancouver Sun* from independent local owner-

ship in 1963, and Southam Inc., which owned the *Province*, were weakened by six labour disruptions at Pacific Press between 1967 and 1984, concluded Edge, which led to the respective chains being taken over by rival corporations. FP Publications was taken over by Thomson Newspapers in 1980, which sold the *Vancouver Sun* to Southam, which in turn was bought up gradually during the early 1990s by Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. Financial losses over the years from the Pacific Press partnership were exacerbated by the unions' ability to stay out on strike or lockout by publishing their own newspaper and prevent the dailies from publishing, according to Edge. "The genesis of the demise of Pacific Press, FP Publications, and Southam can thus be traced back to the plan to publish the *Express*" (Edge, 2001, pp. 375-376.)

The Castlegar Citizen

Castlegar is a town of about 7,000 residents at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers in southeastern British Columbia. The eight newswriters at the weekly *Sun* newspaper, which was founded in 1990 by Vancouver-based Sterling Newspapers, part of the giant international publishing company Hollinger Inc., took out membership in the CEP two years later, according to Swift, mostly because of harsh management at the newspaper.

One publisher, nicknamed Cruella by the staff, would scold ad sales rep Nicole Beestra for dressing "inappropriately" The toxic atmosphere at the office did not improve after the time when Cruella took Nicole to task for bringing her daughter into the office No one ever forgot what was said when Cruella came downstairs, fixed the cranky child with a glacial stare, and asked, "Why don't you just shoot that thing and put it out of its misery?" (Swift, 2003, p. 151)

The first contract negotiated by the CEP on their behalf was therefore more concerned with anti-harassment provisions than with wages and benefits, but when subsequent negotiations attempted to raise pay rates closer to what was paid at Sterling newspapers in nearby Trail and Nelson, they hit a stone wall. According to Swift, "There was festering resentment in Castlegar about the big gap between what they were paid and what Hollinger paid just down the road" (Swift, 2003, p. 151). When the union's demand for a 50-cent hourly wage increase came up 10 cents short, the eight *Castlegar Sun* employees met for lunch at the Greek Oven restaurant on November 4, 1999, to take a strike vote. After they voted unanimously to withdraw their services in support of their wage demands, the workers returned to the *Sun* office, packed up their personal belongings, and began to pace a picket line on the sidewalk in front of the building. The reaction of management, according to Karen Kerkhoff, a member of the bargaining unit, was: "Go ahead. Do us a favour" (quoted in Swift, 2003, p. 155).

Community support for the strikers was strong from the outset of the labour dispute, which was marked by a well-attended rally to support the picketers. Donations also flowed in to the idled newswriters, who were faced with supporting themselves on reduced "strike" pay. Some members of the community not only boycotted Sterling publications, refusing to support them financially by

buying advertising, but even returned delivered editions to their origin (Beestra, 2006). The *Sun*'s editor and publisher continued to put out a scaled-down version of the Sterling newspaper every week while its eight striking staff members picketed outside the building. Within a few weeks, however, the strikers began discussing the possibility of putting out their own newspaper in competition with the *Sun* as a tool to force Sterling back to the bargaining table.

According to Kerkhoff (2006), the impetus for publishing a strike newspaper actually came from members of the community. "A lot of people when we were walking the picket line said: 'You should start your own paper.'" With CEP support, the enterprise was quickly established as a desktop publishing operation, and the first edition of the Castlegar *Citizen* appeared on March 10, 2000. According to Robert Munro, the vice-president of CEP Local 2000 in Vancouver, who served as the strike newspaper's *de facto* publisher, conditions in Castlegar were ripe for the publication of a union alternative to the corporate-owned *Sun*. "As a small operation, the start-up costs were minimal for a local of our size," he noted. "Secondly, Castlegar is a small, relatively close-knit city with a large number of unionized citizens. They were quick to support a strike paper and send a message to merchants that, if they didn't advertise in the *Citizen*, they wouldn't get their business." According to Munro, the union had two main objectives when creating the strike paper.

First of all, we wanted to show that the individuals on strike were very skilled at producing a newspaper and should be valued and rewarded for those skills with a decent collective agreement. Secondly, we wanted to send a message that, whether it was eight people on strike in a small town or 1,000 in Vancouver, they had the full support of their union. (Munro, 2005)

Once the *Citizen* was launched, the community goodwill quickly translated into business goodwill for Castlegar's new employee-run newspaper. Soon the *Citizen* was outpacing the *Sun* as Castlegar's newspaper of choice, with local businesses flocking to support it with advertising. According to the *Citizen*'s advertising sales representative, Nicole Beestra, local merchants found the union-published paper to be not only an effective means of publicizing their products and services, but cost-effective as well due to its lower advertising rates. "Initially I think the bigger businesses in Castlegar jumped on board easily because it was not only supporting the people they had worked with previously but the *Citizen* was an inexpensive vehicle to get their word out," noted Beestra. "As for advertisers that never signed on to us, I can only think of one and that business was very anti-union" (Beestra, 2006).

Despite the high level of community support, however, the striking newsworkers struggled initially to even produce a physical publication without the corporate infrastructure that was enjoyed by the *Sun* through its chain-wide resources. The biggest problem, Swift noted, proved to be printing. "Employer solidarity meant that no newspaper printer in the region would agree to handle a union newspaper, so it had to be printed in Vancouver" (Swift, 2003, p. 153). As Vancouver is a 10-hour drive away, there were problems with getting fresh

content in the paper due to the longer turnaround time than usually faces a weekly paper. Despite that hurdle, circulation, which started at 3,500 copies, eventually almost doubled, to 6,700 (Swift, 2003). According to Munro, one reason the *Citizen* became a going concern was because its staff members all had skills that exceeded their original job descriptions at the *Sun*. The production manager, for example, also did much of the technical troubleshooting for the *Citizen*'s computers, front-end and sales staff took time out on production day to proofread pages, and all staff took calls for classified ads and general inquiries. "The skill sets of the members is crucial. If at any time in the five years of operating we lost key people, the whole enterprise would have folded. We needed people who could not only perform the basic jobs but to do so at a high level of skill and dedication" (Munro, 2005).

After seven months of slipping farther and farther behind the upstart competition from the strike newspaper, Sterling Newspapers announced in late 2000 that it was suspending publication of its strike-bound *Castlegar Sun* newspaper. By that time, according to Swift, "the *Sun* had been reduced to a meagre eight-page sheet, half the size of the *Citizen*, which was brimming with ads" (Swift, 2003, p. 155). The *Sun*'s closure suddenly left the Castlegar market wide open for the *Citizen*, but it also caused strikers and union officials alike to wonder about what they should do next, according to Munro.

We always thought the company would come back to the table. When that didn't look likely, we were left in a quandary over how long we could continue to support the strikers with strike pay. We did try to get the company to negotiate when other contracts were up, but they insisted there was no point since they did not intend to re-open the paper. (Munro, 2005)

The strikers proved less than daunted by the fact they had driven their erstwhile employer out of business and proceeded to take advantage of the fact they had the local publishing field to themselves. Soon, they found a technological solution to their printing problem by sending their made-up pages to the printer in Vancouver electronically through digital transmission instead of sending them to the coast physically by vehicle. At first, the pages had to be shipped to Vancouver on Tuesdays for Friday publication, but when the *Citizen* began sending its pages digitally the turnaround time was greatly reduced, making the *Citizen*'s content fresher. It seemed the *Citizen* could become a self-sustaining operation and the strikers would no longer have to be concerned that their former employer was out of business. Over the next few years, the *Citizen* chugged along like a well-oiled machine. However, it slowly began to lose staff, as two strikers moved on to more secure employment, meaning there was more work to be shared by those remaining.

According to Munro, the *Citizen* survived in Castlegar for as long as it did because it focused editorially on the community and not on the strike. Even the front page of the first edition made no mention of the strike, except for a small text bar at the bottom of the page indicating the strike was in its nineteenth week. Occasional issues did mention the strike (anniversaries of its inception and the

first publication of the *Citizen*, for example) as a reminder to readers, but over the years even editorials and columns focused more on events that affected the entire community. Munro said one of the keys to the success in Castlegar is that the members created a community newspaper, not a union propaganda sheet. "The temptation is always there for union activists to sound off about the benefits of unions. Instead, we wanted to show that union workers could produce a product that was respected and supported by the average members of the community" (Munro, 2005). According to Beestra, this editorial neutrality was one of the key factors behind the *Citizen's* initial financial success as well. "At first advertisers thought we were a vehicle to spread the union message. But after being educated about our 'community paper' format and that really the only time we would be heavy union was going to be on Labour Day and our anniversaries it was actually a pretty easy sell" (Beestra, 2006).

Eventually, however, a more serious challenge emerged in the form of new competition from a weekly newspaper published by the largest chain of weeklies in B.C., Black Press. Owner David Black (no relation to Conrad Black) had built the Victoria-based company from one newspaper—a Williams Lake, B.C., weekly he inherited from his father in 1975—into a chain of more than 80 community newspapers and 10 printing plants scattered across B.C., Alberta, and Washington state. In late 2000, Black Press purchased the daily Honolulu *Star-Bulletin*. In 2002, Torstar Corp., owner of the *Toronto Star*, purchased 19.35% of Black Press for \$20 million, which Black Press committed to further acquisitions, first buying up a group of five B.C. Interior newspapers from Sun Media Corp.'s Bowes Publishers Ltd. in 2003. By early 2004, Black Press counted 95 newspapers in its group and made an offer for the B.C. newspapers owned by Hollinger, which was imploding as a result of legal problems (Shaw, 2004). The bid ultimately failed, but Black Press continued its expansion plans nonetheless, including into Castlegar with a new weekly titled the *News*, which began publishing on April 1, 2004.

Suddenly, after more than three years with Castlegar to itself, the *Citizen* had competition again, but the appearance of the *News* did not automatically spell the end of the *Citizen*. Although some advertisers moved to the *News*, for the most part the *Citizen's* advertising base remained loyal to the strike paper. According to CEP Local 2000 president Mike Bocking, the Black Press publication was "inconsequential" to the survival of the *Citizen*. "They were taking our bad debts, basically" (Bocking, 2006). Several related factors, however, began to weigh against the continued existence of a strike newspaper in Castlegar. First, the decision was made when the *News* came to town to move the *Citizen* to publication on Wednesdays rather than Friday to better compete for news. That meant its completed pages had to be sent to Vancouver by 7 a.m. Tuesday morning. With both city council and school board meetings being held on Monday nights, editorial staff often worked into the early hours of Tuesday to rush the news into print. The added strain and workload came on top of the uncertainty that constantly hung

over the remaining five strikers, who were by then performing the duties of what had originally been eight.

The change in production schedule also caused problems with advertising because of the long turnaround times in printing the *Citizen*, which made it onerous for sales staff to attract enough advertising to make the strike newspaper self-sustaining. Display ads had to be placed a week before publication to ensure advertisers had a chance to proof their ads. According to Munro, that reduced the attractiveness of advertising in the *Citizen*. "For special sales and things like real estate, where the product could be sold before the ad ran, it made it difficult to make the sale" (Munro, 2005). As a result, he added, the CEP was faced with a conundrum due to the prospect that the *Citizen* might never reach a point where its revenues completely covered employee salaries, which were already low because they were set at a rate equivalent to strike pay. "If the *Citizen* had been more profitable we would not only have paid wages without dipping into the union's strike funds, but we would have been able to increase wages and benefits" (Munro, 2005).

With the long-term prospects for the *Citizen* looking bleaker with the arrival of the *News* and the prospect of returning to their original employer already gone, after five years the remaining strikers each had to evaluate their futures. When one of the five staff members who had been with the *Citizen* from its inception decided to go back to school and another was offered a job with more security, a decision was needed on whether to continue the strike publication. As replacements could not be hired due to the fact the *Citizen* was a strike publication put out only by former *Sun* employees, each of the remaining three strikers would have had to assume an additional workload that was originally spread between eight. Finally, the inevitability of the newspaper's demise became apparent, prompting the remaining *Citizen* staff members to call a halt to the strike newspaper. Noted *Citizen* editor Karen Kerkhoff: "I think everybody realized it was time to stop rather than put out a half-assed product. We felt a great responsibility to the community" (Kerkhoff, 2006). She summed up the experience of many over the *Citizen*'s five-year publication life in her final column, in which she concluded: "Community is everything. Without this community, it's likely the *Citizen* wouldn't have opened, let alone operated over five strong years" (quoted in *CBCUnlocked*, 2005).

Discussion

Comparing the Castlegar *Citizen* with the strike newspaper on which the most in-depth research has been done, the Wilkes-Barre *Citizen's Voice*, several similarities are apparent that might help explain their success. The first is the importance of ownership and management. Just as Capital Cities was seen by the strikers, and by local residents, as a threat to local control of news content, so too was Hollinger seen by the CEP and the Castlegar journalists as the root of their problems in the workplace. By 2000, Hollinger had grown from a modest chain of community newspapers based mostly in B.C. under the banner of Sterling Newspapers to the third-largest newspaper company in the world. Controlling share-

holder Conrad Black had followed an anti-union, anti-worker, and even anti-journalist agenda in making Hollinger International a major player on the world stage. Black's right-hand man, David Radler, explained the secret of Sterling's success in testimony before the 1980 Canadian Royal Commission on Newspapers as "the three-man newsroom, and two of them sell ads" (quoted in Black, 1993, p. 378). Radler employed his cost-cutting formula relentlessly at many of the 340 U.S. newspapers acquired by Hollinger over a 10-year period starting in the mid-1980s, including the Chicago *Sun-Times*, earning him the nickname "the human chain saw" (Newman, 1992).

Hollinger's key acquisition was the *Daily Telegraph* in London in 1985, for it became extremely profitable after Black moved it to non-union operations and cut almost three-quarters of the 3,900 *Telegraph* staff from the payroll (Siklos, 1996). A subsequent strike by journalists was defeated when the *Telegraph* continued to publish with new computerized typesetting equipment using only management personnel. That victory over the powerful British unions, Black wrote in his 1993 autobiography, exposed "one of the great myths of the industry: that journalists are essential to producing a newspaper" (Black, 1993, p. 405). After Black masterminded Hollinger's takeover of Southam Inc. in the mid-1990s, labour relations at Canada's oldest and largest newspaper chain went downhill quickly. A month before the *Castlegar Sun* workers voted to strike in late 1999, union members at the nearby *Calgary Herald* did the same, only to suffer a crushing defeat eight months later when the strikers voted to decertify their union and return to work without a contract. When considered in that context, the Castlegar strike and the CEP's assistance in publishing a strike newspaper can be seen as part of a larger union campaign of opposition to Black's confrontational style of labour relations.

Also apparent in the success of both the Wilkes-Barre and Castlegar strike newspapers was the importance of community support. In Wilkes-Barre, local residents and unions rallied around the upstart *Citizen's Voice*, providing it with a loyal readership and an instant advertising base. Small-town newspapers, ironically, have traditionally been the profit centres on which large chains such as Thomson Newspapers and Hollinger International were built, but the secret to their success over the years has been in exploiting monopoly markets. Competition was anathema for Thomson, which built its worldwide empire by pinching pennies at the local level and producing a poor product brimming with lucrative local advertising (Goldenberg, 1984). By keeping tight control of costs, including salaries, Thomson Newspapers became one of the largest owners of small-town newspapers not only in Canada, but also in the U.S. By the 1990s, however, Thomson was selling off its print empire in favour of electronic databases (Prochnau, 1998). The biggest buyer of Thomson's divested newspapers was Hollinger, which incredibly cut costs even further. Owner Conrad Black, however, went one step farther by also bringing a neo-conservative political stance to many of the newspapers acquired by Hollinger, increasing the threat perceived by unions and local communities (Miller, 1998). Given the context of Black's ascen-

dancy as Canada's dominant press owner, as well as his actions against striking workers at the *Calgary Herald*, it is understandable that the CEP leadership and the community of Castlegar rallied together to produce a strike newspaper that published for five years. According to Beestra, the success of the *Citizen* lay in its ability to provide a sense of community to residents of Castlegar that a chain-owned newspaper was not providing.

The big media corporations don't have a lot of respect for small community papers and the people in Castlegar knew it. It was obvious to them we were striking for more than money; it was about what was best for our community. That meant having a community paper that was for the community. (Beestra, 2006)

Conclusions

In September 2005, locked-out CBC workers started their own version of a strike publication in the form of a news website called *CBCUnlocked*, which was produced for the month-long duration of their labour dispute with the public broadcaster. In a history of strike newspapers compiled early in its life, *CBCUnlocked* concluded that the Castlegar *Citizen* failed for three reasons:

The paper decided to close up shop because of stiff competition in the market and the desire of some employees to move on to other projects and more stable employment. Also, the union that subsidized them decided against continuing to help pay the bills because there was no resolution to the strike in sight. (*CBCUnlocked*, 2005)

Of those factors, some were of greater relevance to the closure. According to Janet Ingram-Johnson, a CEP official in Vancouver, the competition from Black Press was of lesser importance than the desire of some strikers to move on to other endeavours (Ingram-Johnson, 2006). With only a handful of original staff members providing their services for a minimum level of strike pay, the loss of any who drifted away was crucial, as replacements could not be hired. Unlike the Wilkes-Barre *Citizen's Voice*, which had a strike force of about 200 to draw on, the small size of the *Citizen* staff and the small size of the Castlegar market doomed the strike newspaper to inevitable failure. That it lasted more than five years is remarkable under the circumstances. According to Bocking, however, there was a strategic reason for the union to keep the *Citizen* alive for as long as possible, for its ability to do so increased its bargaining power with employers throughout the province by aiding the CEP's reputation as a strong union, willing to do whatever it takes to defend its members.

Some employers even think we might be a little crazy. That's not always such a bad thing when you are negotiating. Certainly it cost the Local and the national union a great deal in strike pay. But who knows, maybe it saved us in strike pay because the company demurred from taking us on at a larger publication because of how we fought the Castlegar dispute. (Bocking, 2005)

Much has been written in recent years about increased concentration of newspaper ownership and the profits-before-people approach of most newspaper chain management (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2004). The problem of concentra-

tion has been seen most sharply in Canada due to the smaller size of the market, with a few large owners dominating the newspaper industry (Miller, 1998; Winter, 1997). The result, according to Miller, has been “a crisis in public confidence” in corporate journalism. “Newspapers have lost our trust. . . . They have lost the ability to connect us with our community” (Miller, 1998, p. 17). Increased absentee ownership has in turn led to declining newspaper circulation as readers have become increasingly alienated from their “local” press, as McKercher points out.

Instead of being owned by people with ties to their community, newspapers are owned by corporations whose loyalties and responsibilities lie with their stockholders rather than with local readers. . . . Increasingly, they see their readers as customers or consumers, rather than as neighbors and fellow citizens. (McKercher, 2002, p. 33)

The success of the *Castlegar Citizen* can be seen as in part a product of the backlash against corporate absentee ownership, because it survived due mainly to the enormous community support it received, as was the case with the *Wilkes-Barre Citizen's Voice*. The difference in scale between the newspapers was likely the only reason the larger *Citizen's Voice* endured as an employee-owned enterprise for more than two decades while the *Castlegar Citizen* was forced to cease publication after five years. With only eight irreplaceable employees, it was only a matter of time before they drifted away one by one to different endeavours until there was an insufficient number of staff remaining to sustain the operation.

The *Castlegar Citizen* was an example of what newswriters can do on their own, without the management infrastructure of a newspaper chain or even a printing press. The ingredients necessary to publish a strike newspaper in the event of a strike or lockout were present in abundance: a will on the part of newswriters and their unions to oppose unfavourable policies of ownership, and the support of the community and local advertisers. Any future attempts to publish a strike newspaper will do well to ensure that these ingredients are in place.

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