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Abstract

Because news and entertainment firms are increasingly under the same corporate umbrellas, it is likely that reporting by journalists on the cultural products and activities of their affiliated companies will rise. The theme of this study is that the phenomenon of reporting on one's own company is best understood through perspectives on goal conflict and organizational culture. The article argues the need to modify contemporary scholarly contentions that news firms expect open conflict between reporters and their superiors on policy issues. Interviews at two daily newspapers and *Time* magazine support the theoretically based proposition that investigation of their own organizations is very much an area where journalists draw away from confronting key professional conflicts. Centering on phenomena such as silent bargains and silent routines, the study suggests how conflicts about self-coverage are managed and how this conflict management is tied to larger dynamics of organizational control.

Hidden Conflicts and Journalistic Norms: The Case of Self-Coverage

by Joseph Turow, University of Pennsylvania

Because news and entertainment firms are increasingly under the same corporate umbrellas, it is likely that reporting by journalists on the cultural products and activities of their affiliated companies will rise. The theme of this study is that the phenomenon of reporting on one's own company is best understood through perspectives on goal conflict and organizational culture. The article argues the need to modify contemporary scholarly contentions that news firms expect open conflict between reporters and their superiors on policy issues. Interviews at two daily newspapers and Time magazine support the theoretically based proposition that investigation of their own organizations is very much an area where journalists draw away from confronting key professional conflicts. Centering on phenomena such as silent bargains and silent routines, the study suggests how conflicts about self-coverage are managed and how this conflict management is tied to larger dynamics of organizational control.

This study explores how activities surrounding newsworkers' coverage of their own firms relates to the phenomenon of hidden conflicts in organizations, and it suggests what difference that makes for journalistic output. Though not new, self-coverage by news organizations is more likely to occur in the future than in earlier decades because of major transformations within the media system. Several forecasters project that by the end of the decade about a half dozen huge firms, at most, will dominate the mainstream of news and entertainment in the United States and around the world (Elliman, 1990). Because news and entertainment organizations will increasingly be under the same corporate umbrella, it seems reason-

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able to suggest that reporting by journalists on the cultural products and activities of their affiliated companies will rise.

Some of the tensions have already bubbled into public view. Perhaps the most visible incident was the controversy over *Time* magazine's coverage of its parent firm's purchase of Warner Communications in 1989. Media critics accused *Time*'s editors and writers of tilting their reporting of the merger toward the public relations needs of their parent firm (Bruck, 1990; Cohen, 1992). In trade magazines and academic writings, the incident stimulated concern about situations in which loyalty to the parent company faces off against a mandate to report the news impartially. It sparked arguments about the implications of competing business and editorial values in news organizations (Ciabattari, 1989).

Despite such discussions, little thought has been given to the way this sort of tension relates to other types of conflicts in news organizations. Nor has attention been paid to the way in which the increased potential for covering oneself in the new media environment has actually affected the activities of newswriters. The purpose of this article is to provide a theoretical framework for addressing these issues, supported by exploratory research that involved interviews with journalists at two nationally prominent newspapers and at *Time* magazine.

The study argues the need to modify contemporary scholarly contentions that news firms expect to see open conflict on policy issues between reporters and their superiors. The article agrees with contemporary opinion that organizational argumentation represents the norm rather than (as writers of earlier decades contended) the exceptions in news organizations. Yet it departs from contemporary writings in suggesting the importance of understanding when, why, and how reporters and their superiors pull back from conflict-laden discussions about their work.

The research indicates that investigation of their own organizations is very much an area where journalists draw away from confronting key professional conflicts. When it comes to self-coverage, organizational processes typically serve both to obstruct the activity and to mute tensions about that obstruction. At the same time, the study finds that the very forces that discourage journalists from investigating their own firms or talking about them sometimes do allow—or, in the case of *Time*, feel compelled to allow—certain types of self-coverage. Centering on phenomena such as silent bargains and silent routines, the study suggests how conflicts about self-coverage are managed and how this conflict management is tied to larger dynamics of organizational control.

Tracking Internal Dissension

The existence and nature of conflicts between journalists and their sources has long been a topic of much interest in studies of newswork (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Lippmann, 1922; Rosten, 1937; Sigal, 1973).

When it comes to conflicts within news firms, however, the scholarly literature is much less abundant (Schudson, 1992). Nevertheless, it is possible to note an important change in scholarly perspectives on the pervasiveness and significance of internal conflicts.

Before the late 1970s, academics by and large agreed that journalists learn their firms' news policies through a socialization process generally free of open, ongoing quarrels between reporters and those who hire them. To be sure, researchers noted that conflicts over resource priorities and turf is a common occurrence within and between news departments (Reese & Shoemaker, 1991; Tunstall, 1971). Moreover, researchers agreed that potential for overt conflict within newsrooms over news policies does exist. Yet they argued that policy fights within newsrooms between reporters and editors or publishers were held at bay through compromising (Gans, 1979), trying furtively to blunt the corners of policy (Breed, 1960; Tunstall, 1971), quitting the organization (Hirschman, 1970), or simply abiding the policy to keep a job (Breed, 1960).

Sigelman (1973) proposed that in many news organizations conflicts were kept to a minimum through "organizational processes which are structured to avoid conflict between reporters and their superiors" (p. 132). He argued that self-selection of individuals for reportorial positions, hiring decisions by editors, and the matching of stories and reporters by the editors were mechanisms that reduced the chance of clashes between journalistic superiors and subordinates. When he and other researchers did mention outright attempts by journalists to argue openly among themselves and with their bosses over policies, they portrayed these incidents as unusual—as, for example, in a review of the way women journalists brought coverage of the women's movement into *The New York Times* (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1979).

This idea that overt conflict over policies is unusual and temporary in news organizations has been challenged persuasively in recent academic writings about news. Following in the footsteps of a much earlier essay by Stark (1962), researchers have begun to stress that overt divisions between reporters and their superiors over news goals and norms exist continually in many newsrooms along lines of class, gender, race, and ethnicity (Johnson, 1993; Lule, 1992). Comparing the current stress on conflict to the many earlier writings that emphasized few obvious tensions, it is tempting to suggest that part of the difference in findings is due to the fact that journalism firms today do actually embody more conflicts than in earlier decades. One reason may be that, as Hallin (1986) notes, the trend over the course of the twentieth century has been toward journalists' increased demand for professional autonomy from their firms' business interests. Another cause may be that some newsrooms have become more diverse than before, as women and, more slowly, minorities have been entering journalism (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986). As these groups have been moving into mainstream news firms, they have been forming coalitions to change certain policies and force the airing of certain views.

At the same time, other contemporary news scholars (Bantz, 1984; Dimmick, 1979) insist that overt conflicts over news goals and norms always have been and always will be at the core of newswork. Their implication is that researchers in earlier decades simply were not tuned in or privy to the continuing and widespread nature of these quarrels. Bantz, for example, sees a patterned "culture of conflict" over resources and policies as typical of newswork. Journalists, he notes, revel in their attachment to a journalism profession that extends beyond their organization, in being known for the pursuit of news values rather than audience (or organizational) values, in aggressively exploring stories at the expense of collegiality, and in showing concern for news goals at the expense of business goals. He contends that the seeds of open organizational conflict lie in all these values.

Bantz adds that cooperation is a way that newsworkers attempt intermittently to manage their many conflicts with superiors and colleagues so that their organization can create its product and compete with other organizations. He emphasizes that despite cooperative behavior newsworkers acknowledge the widespread and open nature of their organizational conflict. He states that, whereas such quarreling is not defined as acceptable in many sorts of organizations, all sorts of conflict are accepted as a routine, even a good and necessary, fact of life in journalism firms. By which he means that journalism organizations as a class acknowledge that interpersonal disagreements about the goals and norms of newswork lie at the very center of what it means to be a journalist.

This contemporary stress on organizational conflicts and their implications has opened new avenues for studying the news process and its products. It raises questions, for example, about the nature and formation of newsroom coalitions and the role of disenfranchised groups in the newsroom. Too, it encourages a reexamination of popular histories of news (Friendly, 1967; Gates, 1978; Keeler, 1990; Robertson, 1992; Sperber, 1986) through a scholarly prism of conflict as the norm rather than the exception. Yet just as the academic writings prior to the late 1970s may have placed too great an emphasis on consensus in the newsroom, so the contemporary emphasis on open conflict may obscure important circumstances in which organizations are afraid to openly acknowledge tensions and stir up arguments.

Newswork and Hidden Conflicts

The existence of such circumstances is suggested by a relatively recent but growing literature on what have been called hidden conflicts in organizations (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992). The phrase has been used to describe frictions in organizations that do not match the formal, rational, and collectively recognized dissensions that academic writers have traditionally addressed. Lately, an increasing number of researchers have turned their

attentions to important ongoing conflicts over goals and norms that take place informally and privately, "in the nooks and crannies of organizations" (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992, p. viii). The people involved do not acknowledge the frictions publicly, often out of fear that doing so might threaten their organization's stability and, ultimately, their own professional situations.

The act of reporting on one's own organization would seem to be one area where conflicts cannot be acknowledged openly. It would seem that conflict over goals and norms could be tolerated, even celebrated, only when the essential purpose of the activities is to cover the outside world. The reason is that the conflict over news values as well as collegial competition can be seen by management and newswriters alike as contributing individually and collectively to the reputation and profits of the journalist's own organization. When reporting is turned inward, though, management and newswriters alike might sometimes see the costs as far outweighing the benefits.

They might, for example, see certain kinds of reporting on their own organization as opening the journalism firm to scrutiny from the outside world, resulting in a possible loss of prestige and profits. From this point of view, the journalistic values that encourage organizational conflict may lose their weight. Both management and newswriters might consider them selfish concerns that should not supersede the reporter's presumed goal of long-term health for the news organization and its employees. At the same time, acknowledgment that a news firm considers a topic off-limits might so conflict with the image news organizations want to project to themselves and others that both parties might share an interest in not admitting to themselves or others that those limits exist.

The way organizations manage such tensions without open discussion about them is a subject that is only beginning to get sustained attention. Strauss (1978) suggests a useful direction by noting that one way to keep conflicts from becoming public is by engaging in silent bargains. An example is when an elderly patient makes an implicit agreement with a hospital caretaker to complain relatively little about pain in return for company and friendly relations. Here the caretaker's conflicting goals of compassionate care and rapid work completion meet the patient's conflicting goals of pain reduction and companionship in a lonely situation. Both have a vested interest in resolving their internal and interpersonal conflicts in a way that does not open up the difficulties to painful discussion; the caretaker does not want to admit goals beyond professional aid and the patient feels that begging for companionship might drive the would-be companion away. In the end, it is the caretaker's power over the patient that sets the key terms of the hidden bargain that holds benefits for both.

As this example suggests, Strauss understands that "power, domination, and political considerations" guide the amount of argumentation and its openness in organizations. Silent bargains, he indicates, come about

when parties to a conflict over goals or norms both have a vested interest in the fiction that nothing has gone awry in the organization or in their relationship. While explicit negotiations do not take place, he says, each party respects the other's stakes in the game of mutual pretense, "but only up to the limits set by whoever was more powerful in setting those limits" (p. 254). The result of this ritual drama of pretense is that the parties to these hidden conflicts manage the tensions in ways which suit particular agendas while not making public issues of them.

Strauss's approach lends interesting insight into the process of managing conflicts that members of organizations tacitly agree must be suppressed. At the same time, a major difficulty of suggesting that Strauss's model can be applied directly to understanding the phenomenon of covering oneself is that his notion of silent bargains relies almost exclusively on dyadic interactions between superior and subordinate members of an organization to suppress highly charged tensions over norms and goals. It would seem reasonable to suggest that if organization-wide mechanisms could be seen that discourage certain types of reporting while keeping that prohibition beneath the surface, the mechanisms would involve interactions among newswriters of the same status as well as those in different levels of the hierarchy.

The present study aimed, then, to ask two questions. First, to what extent do mechanisms exist within news organizations to discourage investigations of their own firms and to mute conflicts about the topic? And second, if such mechanisms do exist, what are they, how are they diffused, and how do they influence journalistic behavior and products?

In-Depth Interviews

To begin addressing the questions, this exploratory study focused on three apparent exceptions: news sources that had published articles about themselves. As Tuchman (1977) notes, "exceptions enable the observer to perceive and so to examine hidden structures, ideologies, and powers" (p. 43). For this investigation, one exception was *Time* magazine, which had not only carried controversial articles about its parent firm's purchase of Warner Communications, but had printed reviews and articles about movies, books, and other products created by other Time Warner divisions. The other apparent aberrations were prominent dailies that had published investigative articles about newsmaking in which the papers publishing the articles had been discussed.

The journalists who wrote the newspaper pieces were interviewed at length to determine why and how those pieces were written, the extent of deviation from their firms' norms about covering oneself, and whether the pieces caused major problems in their wake. At Time Warner, interviews were conducted with two *Time* writers, one editor, three marketing executives, and two corporate communication executives. They took

place during summer 1991, fall 1991, and winter 1992—all within two years of the merger. The issue of covering oneself was broached through questions about the development of articles in which Time Warner movies and books were featured prominently. Those interviewed were asked about an article dealing directly with conflicts of interests by magazine reviewers (including those at *Time*). They were also questioned concerning their knowledge of self-coverage conflicts that had been swirling in the trade and popular press.

The interviews averaged about an hour, with the longest one taking about an hour and a half. All ten of the people interviewed preferred to hold their names confidential. In fact, the two newspaper journalists spoke only on the condition that neither they, their newspaper, nor their articles would be mentioned. Both emphasized that very few articles of the sort they wrote are published in mainstream newspapers and that speaking about them even without providing their names would reveal who they are.

Knowing When Stories Are Off-Limits

The unanimous concern for confidentiality was a measure of the sensitivity of this topic in the news organizations studied. Four journalists in the group agreed that the prickly organizational tensions they were discussing would be difficult to share publicly. Journalists in their firms, they believed, understand that their editors consider some types of stories off-limits.

In general, the four respondents contended that trying to get editorial permission for tough investigative reports about the goings-on in one's organization, or one's parent organization, would be near-futile. It would be just as difficult to get permission to cover organization–advertiser business relationships. As the journalists understood it, the reason was simple: The stories might result in embarrassing revelations that could disturb financial relationships and so cut off important sources of revenue.

The comments of the two newspaper journalists set the stage for explaining the dynamics of this situation. Both maintained that while topics such as these may be part of the gossip mill, newswriters would not propose them to editors as serious story ideas. They said that for some reporters—those who cover beats that have nothing to do with the gossip—the stated reason may be that the issue has nothing to do with their jobs. But underlying everyone's approach to such stories, they contended, was fear. One fear was that the need to balance concerns about the news with worries about their job security and their firm's viability might make any work on such a subject inadequate. Another fear was that such a submission would brand the author as a troublemaker or as naive about how the world works. As one of the journalists noted, "reporters are concerned about their livelihood."

The reporters indicated there was some discussion laterally in the organizations, that is, among reporters, about goings-on in the firm that might be grist for their periodicals. They admitted, though, that journalists do not argue with each other about the importance of covering those topics. But despite the fact that lateral gossip is not uncommon within various organizational levels, on a vertical basis (between reporters and the editors above them) it is rare. Those interviewed suspected that both reporters and writers feel uncomfortable talking about such things with their superiors.

Their remarks suggest that neither silent bargains with superiors nor explicit discussions with one another were the immediate cause of the general awareness by reporters of what not to talk about with whom. Rather, their assimilation of these notions seemed to take place through the learning of what might be called silent routines. As the name implies, silent routines are hard to notice because they involve an absence of organizational discussion. Journalists make attributions that their colleagues are averse even to talking about self-coverage by noting that it rarely comes up as a topic of serious discussion within the news organization. The perceived validity of these attributions is reinforced when they see little, if any, self-coverage in the paper itself. The collective attributions, in turn, reinforce patterns of behaviors and expectations (habits) that lead workers to avoid broaching subjects in situations they believe are inappropriate and will get them in trouble. Thus the sensitive problem of figuring out how to investigate parts of their own company becomes a non-issue without much discussion.

The Exceptions, the Rules, and Silent Bargains

Yet while the journalists suggested that silent routines carried the burden of keeping self-coverage and its tensions muted, their discussions of how the exceptions came about revealed that silent bargains between superiors and subordinates did play an important role in establishing norms of self-coverage. They contended that editors wanted them to see their self-coverage story as a painful exception to typical journalistic duties.

The experience helped reporters understand how far they could go with exceptions. It also served to reinforce their sense that such coverage was generally a bad idea, because it placed their status as popular and savvy members of their organizations at risk. The silent bargain, initiated by the editors, was that withdrawal from this kind of reportage and future silence about it would reestablish the status implied in their previous give-and-take relationships with superiors at the papers.

To understand where the two journalists got these ideas, consider first their interpretations of why the pieces covering their firms were accepted and what that told them about the rules of self-coverage. Some of what they said about getting their stories into print recalls findings by Breed

(1960), Gans (1979), Roshco (1975), Tuchman (1979), Tunstall (1971) and others that reporters with special expertise can sometimes get away with transgressing newspaper policy. Yet there is an additional element here: even while exulting in the success of getting their ideas out, the reporters clearly revealed their inference from editors that movement away from self-coverage would be necessary to make all their professional lives easier.

A key reason their superiors accepted their stories, they said, was that the articles were not primarily about their own firms. One reporter said he had pitched the idea to his editors as hard news that related to newspapers generally. The other had a related topic suggested to him, but then broadened it to include issues that touched on his own organization.

In both cases the journalists said they made it clear to their bosses from the start that the examination of their organization was only to be a small portion of the piece; only a few paragraphs of very long articles were devoted to material about their own firms. Moreover, as if to show that they did not feel guilty investigating their firms, both reporters said they suspected from the start that the problems they were exposing around the country hardly existed in their own papers. Much to their relief, this was confirmed in their research on their own organizations. Both were vague as to what they would have done had their investigations found differently.

Another reason superiors allowed the stories, according to the journalists, was because those who suggested them had longtime beats. Both contended that even though their controversial proposals were not related directly to their beats (and in one case was far removed from it), their solid reputations inside and outside the papers led their editors to believe they would write responsibly, that is, in a way that would not embarrass the firm. One reporter's remarks, though, made his bosses sound especially defensive. He sensed his editors felt that because his beat was at least marginally related to the topic, and because he generally had final control over what he said on his beat, they could disavow primary responsibility for running the article if it caused major problems with the publisher or corporate owners.

Still, both newspaper journalists made it clear that as the story progressed, tensions that worked against its publication were ultimately eased by invocations of journalistic integrity by one or more editors. Those editors said they knew firsthand that the problems they were discussing exist in papers throughout the country. They insisted to their more cautious counterparts that the topic was newsworthy, and they called forth journalistic values and tradition of the paper in arguing that the article ought to be published. As one of the respondents said, "Ultimately, the news imperative—to allow writers to document stories well and stand by those stories—won out."

The invocation of journalistic values did not sweep away the problem of self-coverage in a general sense, though. Despite the appearance of

their articles, and even though they were pleased with the placement and length of the pieces, the journalists said they knew their superiors did not welcome more of the same. Their answers indicate, in fact, that at the same time the journalists and editors were working to bring the articles into print, both parties were dropping subtle and not-so-subtle cues that after publication it would be useful to restore the undiscussed patterns of behavior, the silent routines, that had deterred them from covering their own organization.

The journalists said their editors were quite aware that there were other reporters in the firm whose beats were the most appropriate for covering those stories. One of the reporters noted that in his case the beat reporter could have claimed jurisdiction over the topic but did not. To him, and to the other journalist, the lack of comment from the beat reporters signaled what they already knew: Subjects relating to the business of newspapers that touch on their firms' inner workings are too sensitive to pitch on a regular basis.

In discussing their attitudes toward pushing the stories through, both journalists used phrases indicating that these were special cases that took more than their usual effort. One, referring to his reputation and experience, said, "The bottom line is they might lose a guy like me if they don't run the story." The other similarly said that his stature allowed him, an "800-pound gorilla" among reporters in the firm, to imply to his bosses, "This is important. I'm going to the mat on this." Both reporters were quite aware, however, that "going to the mat" and implicitly threatening to leave are acts that must be done rarely to have their desired effect.

In the case of one of the reporters, the cue to restore the silent routines if he were to retain his organizational status was virtually explicit. He had a particularly difficult time moving his idea from submission to final acceptance. He asserted that while investigative pieces normally take a long time at his paper because a number of editors go over them quite carefully, this one took a good deal longer than was typical. Moreover, he said, the piece fostered more than the usual conflict among the editors as well as between them and him. He recalled that at one point an editor told him, "You're not going to win any popularity contests writing up stories like this." Although still interested in exploring the subject, he admitted that he was discounting his newspaper as the intended outlet and instead was hoping to share his ideas with academic and other specialized audiences.

Major Conflict at Time

These two newspaper reporters' experiences in covering their own organizations are examples of the way journalistic exceptions are both allowed as a result of explicit negotiation and cordoned off as unusual through silent bargains. The situation at Time can also be understood through the lenses of hidden conflict, silent routines, and silent bargains.

The Time case, though, is an example of what happens when major organizational traumas cause silent routines and silent bargains to break down.

Those interviewed described an approach to self-coverage before Time's union with Warner that was similar to the one confronting the newspaper journalists. Like the newspaper journalists, and for similar reasons, the two *Time* magazine writers and one editor who were interviewed described a traditional tendency toward not proposing coverage of their own firm to management. At the same time, their comments consistently suggested that a kind of silent bargain had existed with management that had allowed organizational pride to operate despite such self-censorship.

That bargain was the implicit assurance that, as long as journalists understood that writing about their own organization in the magazine was a bold move not to be carried out or even suggested lightly, the firm would back their coverage of such a sensitive subject. The people interviewed seemed to have inferred this bargain from their company's long-proclaimed separation of "Church" (its editorial side) from "State" (its business side). First proclaimed by *Time*'s founder Henry Luce (who ironically supervised both areas of his company) and backed up by the putative power of the firm's editor-in-chief at the corporate level, proclamation of *Time*'s separation of Church and State became a powerful way to encourage loyalty to the magazine on the part of employees and the public at large (Ciabattari, 1989).

It was, in fact, the credibility of this Church-State rhetoric that was questioned openly within the magazine firm as Time's union with Warner took place. So, too, the norms that discouraged *Time* staffers from openly pitching investigative stories about their own firm became subject to intense evaluation. Part of the reason was public scrutiny. In the popular and trade press, the union of Time and Warner set off an explosion of speculation about whether combining the journalistic giant with the entertainment giant would wreak havoc on *Time*'s supposed Church and State norms.

Rumors circulated in *The New Yorker* magazine and elsewhere that Jason McManus, Time Inc. editor-in-chief, had intervened to shape his flagship magazine's coverage of the merger in ways that benefitted the new corporation, not journalism (Bruck, 1990). These suspicions were followed by allegations in a book about "the end of *Time*" (written by former *Time* executive Clurman [1992]) that McManus had forced his editors to sign a promise that they would not write unfavorable things about their company. Such disclosures fueled speculations as to how the Time Warner combination would affect the way the review sections of *Time*, *People*, and *Entertainment Weekly* would consider Warner Brothers films, Warner books, and Warner records (Ciabattari, 1989).

This study's interviews suggest that inside the company's magazine division, other problems loomed at least as large as the aforementioned

speculations. Cost reductions to help reduce merger debt instigated layoffs and buyouts of many of the magazine firm's workers. The attrition left the survivors feeling insecure and questioning the new firm's commitment to its periodicals. From a strictly monetary standpoint, there was reason to be concerned. Before Time's union with Warner, the division had brought in about 40% of Time Inc.'s revenues. In the huge new corporation, the magazines' contribution to revenues was proportionately smaller, about 20%, and the general magazine business was in a recession.

Recognizing their loss of centrality to the firm, the marketing heads of what was now the Time Inc. Magazines unit of Time Warner came up with a new strategy for keeping the periodicals a key part of corporate thinking. They realized that Warner's film, music, and book divisions all relied on consumers, not advertisers, to support their products. That provided a wedge for the periodical's contribution to the conglomerate. The magazine executives decided to exploit the fact that their division was the chief source of advertising revenues in Time Warner. They believed that magazines could be made credible to the conglomerate's chief planners if they could be used as magnets to attract support from international corporations for several units of the firm. In the spirit of synergy that chairman Steve Ross was heralding, the magazines' salespeople would catalyze deals with advertisers to buy space across the magazines while they used Warner records, books, TV shows, and even movies as promotional vehicles or premiums. In this way, magazines would serve as a major new platform on which the entertainment and promotion possibilities of the new conglomerate could be realized (Cappo, Danzig, & Donaton, 1990; Donaton, 1990; Donaton & Winters, 1990; Sarafin, 1990; Turow, 1992).

Trying to Reset Norms

In view of the reduction of editorial personnel and the repositioning of the magazine unit to fit the entertainment-and-promotion approach of the new firm, Time Warner's commitment to separating its business from journalistic norms was questioned inside the company as well as outside it. What was happening was goal conflict of major proportions, with potentially costly implications for *Time's* public image and its organizational cohesiveness. Comments by those interviewed and public remarks by editors suggest that *Time's* leaders tried to manage the disharmony in two ways: (1) by proclaiming that certain kinds of self-coverage are acceptable, even desirable, no matter how unfavorable the tone; and (2) by encouraging plausible arguments within the firm about why such self-coverage would not necessarily be tainted by conflict of interest.

The first tack, defining certain kinds of self-coverage as desirable, was obviously important for a magazine with back-of-the-book reviews of movies, sound recordings, books, TV shows, and other facets of popular

culture in which Time Warner was a major player. Those interviewed stated that the magazine's top management had publicly assured full autonomy within departments for the selection of products and the tone of reviews. They were aware, too, that since the merger, the magazine had not shied away from covering the discord at its parent company, including the ouster of co-chairman Nick Nicholas. Particularly startling in this regard was a respectful review of Clurman's *To the End of Time* that detailed power struggles within the firm before and even after the merger (Manning, 1992). In general, those interviewed said, *Time* management's public message to employees and readers through such writings was that a barrier does indeed exist between the editorial and business sides of the company.

Linked to this rehabilitation of the Church-and-State proclamation was an argument that seems to have caught on within the firm about why *Time* magazine's reviews of Time Warner movies, books, and records would remain free from management's interference. Reviews were the most common place where *Time* writers' journalistic sensibility could conflict with company interests. In interviews for this study, one writer and both of the corporate communication executives gave the same explanation as to why the company had to keep reviewing procedures honest. They contended it would harm the magazine's revenues in the long run if the reviewing process was tainted, because readers would stop trusting the magazine.

To this claim that self-interest would encourage Time Warner's sufferance of *Time*'s journalistic values, the writer offered a curious amendment. He remarked that Time Warner management may allow its magazines to exercise journalistic norms in reviews because, in the end, management does not consider the magazines' opinions about Time Warner products or their competitors' products all that influential:

Time Warner is a very big company. It owns everything. So everything is a conflict of interest. That is to say, if we were to write something negative about one of our products, if we were to write something positive about one of our competitor's products, either of those could be taken as hurting the company. But the people who run it understand that we're trying to be journalists, and they may also realize that we have very little impact.

Whether or not this startling suggestion has a basis in fact is not the point here. Rather, the statement should be seen as another argument offered to make the firm's new Church-State proclamation credible. From discussions with the people at *Time*, it seems that in conjunction with the editors' publication of seemingly bold articles (such as the Clurman book review and the apparently frank coverage of the Nick Nicholas ouster) the Church-State proclamation was functioning to move the firm away from the dangers to organizational stability posed by the public goal con-

flicts. By showing and telling one another as well as the public that Time Warner has no designs on *Time*'s decisions to highlight the conglomerate's products, management and employees seemed to be trying to dampen the conflicts that had been threatening their status, their firm, and their jobs.

New Silent Routines

Those interviewed agreed that management's assurances about the new Church-State division were not fully persuasive. Two of the writers volunteered that their reading of the magazine showed them that *Time* would not be honest in covering its parent. One of them, who was leaving the firm, specifically linked Ted Turner's being named 1991 Man of The Year by *Time* to relationships with the parent company (*Time*, 1992). At the time, about 30% of Turner Broadcasting System was owned by Time Warner. Time Warner's annual reports and marketing executives had been making it clear that they consider their equity in the Cable News Network (CNN), WTBS, and Turner's other holdings as allowing them to work jointly and strategically with that firm. Calling Turner Man of the Year might, then, be considered an advertisement for a Time Warner affiliate. Turner's appearance on the cover was accompanied by a long story celebrating his firm's past, present, and future. At the same time, his connection to Time Warner was never mentioned in the story.

Both writers drew a similar interpretation regarding another conflict of interest: *Time*'s cover story on author Scott Turow and his hit books *Presumed Innocent* and *Burden of Proof* (*Time*, 1990; Gray, 1990). During the week that Warner Books was releasing *Presumed Innocent* in paperback and a few months before Warner Brothers would release the film version of the narrative, *Time* drew up a cover story on the author that trumpeted both the book and film—but did not mention the Time Warner link. In interviews, people involved with the story insisted that they chose it on its merits, that they did not go out of their way to use their journalistic vehicle to hype Warner's entertainment products. They insisted they had the right to review and highlight pieces that were created by their parent firm. But they gave inconsistent and somewhat puzzling answers about why mentions of Warner Books and Warner Brothers did not show up in the cover story. One writer contended somewhat improbably that he often pays no attention to the name of the company that distributes the movies he reviews.

The same staffers who denied being influenced by Time Warner's relationship with Scott Turow were, however, quite prepared to believe that some of their colleagues might be influenced. Even when those interviewed did not point to particular examples of tainted self-coverage, they acknowledged that it might be happening. All of the Time respondents, including the marketing and corporate communication executives, specu-

lated that some editors and writers might well be interpreting signals from management or articles in the magazine as meaning they would be quietly rewarded for writing certain reviews or stories in ways that could benefit Time Warner. Three of those interviewed were even more specific. They voiced a suspicion that in Time Warner's new environment editors and writers were going beyond their traditional fear of investigating the firm. They might, the employees argued, quietly—without telling anyone—be arranging their writing in response to key Time Warner publicity needs with the hope of later rewards from management. Only one respondent, a writer, admitted that he might do that himself in the future. But the link between silent bargains, silent routines, and self-censorship in coverage of Time Warner was quite clear in the comments of all of them.

Assessing the Dynamics of Silence

Focusing on journalists' approaches to covering their own organizations, the present study argues the need to modify contemporary scholarly contentions that news firms are accustomed to open conflict between reporters and superiors as a way to work out policy issues. It does not challenge the implication by Bantz (1984), Johnson (1993), Lule (1992), and others that research of earlier decades tended to underplay policy-related conflict in newsrooms. It suggests, instead, that there exist particular types of circumstances where journalists' fears for their jobs combine with their superiors' fear of extreme organizational instability to lead both parties to avoid, suppress, and otherwise manage conflict in complex ways.

The study suggests that a useful framework for exploring such conflict management comes from sociological work on hidden conflicts in organizations and their relationship to silent bargains. Guided by theoretical constructs from these areas, the study tracks some of the tensions that shape an organization's self-coverage, maps some of the boundaries of that activity, and speculates on how the process might influence what gets out as news and reviews. The findings suggest that the dynamics of conflict about self-coverage are even more complex than the silent-bargain notion of conflict management would imply. Silent bargains were found in superior-subordinate relations, but they were buttressed fundamentally by silent routines that served to keep the subject of self-coverage generally quiescent among writers and reporters without direct managerial involvement.

The exploration of self-coverage at *Time* magazine in the wake of its parent's purchase of Warner serves as a particularly illuminating case. It suggests what happens when silent bargains and silent routines that keep the subject quiet are severed by events that raise hidden conflict to public debate and virtually force self-coverage. Interviews indicate Time Warner

management explicitly encouraged their magazine personnel to cover the firm in a detached, journalistic manner. At the same time, however, *Time* personnel saw contradictions between those encouragements and the articles their magazine printed. They inferred from the inconsistencies that management had instituted a new silent bargain with others in the magazine's staff, a bargain in which staff adopted silent routines in exchange for status and organizational stability. They had reason to believe that covertly—in the silent routines which journalists pretend to one another do not exist—a reward system about self-coverage was taking root that stressed caution and loyalty along with the increased frequency of organizational self-coverage.

The people interviewed at Time Warner denied that they themselves had gone against journalistic values in their writings or directives. Still, they were quick to add their belief that tensions regarding self-coverage which accompanied the merger had led many of their colleagues to strategically and quietly sidestep the firm's own journalistic norms to protect their organizational status. Even if they were wrong about their colleagues, these and other comments acknowledged a basic reorientation of perceptions about their company and its members. At the very least, their remarks indicate that the conflicts over self-coverage engendered underground suspicions that devalued the credibility of the news periodical in the eyes of the very people who were creating it. That in itself may be a first step toward refraining from writing about certain items or writing about them in certain ways.

More research is needed to discover whether the dynamics suggested by this exploratory study can be noted in other merger and non-merger situations. Quantitative studies linking different kinds of mergers to changes in the norms of newswriters, as well as in the amount and nature of self-coverage by journalistic outlets involved in the mergers, would also be useful. Quantifying evidence of such shifts is likely to be difficult, however, because trends are likely to be seen over a long period and because connections with the periodical or its parent firm are often not indicated in the articles.

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