

“Igniting courage and hope”

A study of leadership in the
declining newspaper industry

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Abstract: This thesis investigates how editors-in-chief of Swedish local and regional daily newspapers construct and communicate their reality in terms of threats and solutions. The purpose is to shed light on how editors understand and cope with the turbulent environment and continuous decline of the newspaper industry. Within a constructivist perspective, this thesis aims to contribute to the current body of research on the role of editors-in-chief, and, by extension, on the role of leaders in declining industries in general. It draws on a qualitative interview study with 15 editors-in-chief, from which a narrative account of their perceived reality is constructed.

The study reveals how the editors largely share a common view of the future, the present situation, and what has brought them there. They see the newspaper industry as struggling for survival by trying to transform from a printed to a digital format, in an environment heavily impacted by the digital transformation. The speed of transformation, the lack of adequate competence, and the difficulty to attract digital customers, are seen as the largest threats to their newspapers. To survive, editors-in-chief believe newspapers must attract new digital subscribers by publishing relevant and local journalism backed-up by data analysis. Editors express relief in seeing a way forward, and view the digital reader-business as a return to journalistic traditions. Combining the theories of sensemaking during organizational crisis, and sensemaking during organizational change, we create a model for the process of sensemaking in dissolving declining industries. Using the model, the editors’ construction and communication of reality is revealed: In the turbulent contexts they are facing, editors’ understanding is constructed in ways to cope with the uncertainty and ambiguity that surrounds them, and with the implicit, but sometimes explicit, purpose of creating frames of meaning that can enable action when communicated to employees.

The study provides a broad picture of the views of editors-in-chief on the development of the industry and which strategies are useful to cope with these changes. It questions

previous understandings of editors' perception of the managerial/journalistic divide, as well as of the effect of the digital transformation on the journalistic work.

Key Words: newspaper, editor-in-chief, leadership, declining industry, sensemaking.

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1 Introduction

Despite recognition of its importance for democracy,¹ several Swedish newspapers went bankrupt or closed down in 2019.² It is not unlikely more will follow in coming years.³ Since the turn of the century, the newspaper industry has seen revenues decline.⁴

The digital transformation makes traditional distribution obsolete,⁵ while at the same time starving the industry's main source of income; advertisements – by moving ads and subsequent revenues from newspapers to large internet-based actors like Facebook and Google.⁶ The number of subscribers is declining⁷ and cost cuts and restructurings are now commonplace.⁸ The digital transformation is bringing about new possibilities for entrepreneurs, endless opportunities for start-ups, but will it be the end of newspapers?

A declining industry such as the newspaper business⁹ puts a very high demand on leaders.¹⁰ Still, there is little research on declining industries in general,¹¹ and on leadership in the newspaper industry specifically.¹² In our view, this is unfortunate for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the survival of the newspaper industry is important for our democracy, and secondly because editors-in-chief are neither the first nor the last leaders that will find themselves having to navigate an industry facing decline.

¹ Regeringskansliet. Medier. <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/medier/> (Retrieved May 5, 2020)

² Nesser, Johannes. 300 jobb borta på ett år. *Tidningen Journalisten*. Dec 19, 2019.

<https://www.journalisten.se/nyheter/300-jobb-borta-pa-ett-ar> (Retrieved May 5, 2020)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ohlsson, Jonas. *Medieutveckling 2019 – Medieekonomi*. Myndigheten för press, radio och tv, 2019. p. 6.

⁵ Andersson, Ulrika. Det prasslar inte lika mycket om tidningsläsningen som förr. In *Sprickor i fasaden – SOM-undersökningen 2017*. Andersson, Ulrika et al. (ed.), Göteborgs universitet, 2017. p. 215

⁶ Ohlsson. *Medieutveckling 2019 – Medieekonomi*. 2019. pp. 3, 36.

⁷ Andersson. Det prasslar inte lika mycket om tidningsläsningen som förr. 2017. pp. 214-215

⁸ Ohlsson. *Medieutveckling 2019 – Medieekonomi*. 2019. p. 39

⁹ See section 1.2.1

¹⁰ Cameron, Kim, Kim, Myung and Whetten, David. Organizational Effects of Decline and Turbulence. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Vol. 32, nr 2, 1987: 222-240. pp. 225, 234

¹¹ Carmeli, Abraham and Sheaffer, Zachary. How Leadership Characteristics Affect Organizational Decline and Downsizing. *Journal of Business Ethics*. Vol. 86, nr. 3, 2009: 363-378. p. 363

¹² Djerf Pierre, Monica and Weibull, Lennart. *Ledarskap i framgångsrika tidningsföretag : en studie av tidningsledarna på Borås tidning, Nya Wermlands-tidningen, Sundsvalls tidning, Barometern och Jönköpings-posten under 180 år*. Institutionen för journalistik och masskommunikation, Göteborgs universitet. 2009. p. 14

We therefore want to examine how editors-in-chief in the declining newspaper industry understand their organizations' environment and situation, and how they try to find a way forward. The case we have chosen is editors-in-chief of contemporary Swedish local and regional daily newspapers.

1.1 The Swedish Newspaper Industry

“The fourth estate”, “the guardians of democracy” – many are the phrases to describe the role and importance of media. The idea that media has a crucial role for the functioning of democracy and society underpins Swedish media politics, which includes a publicly funded broadcasting media as well as state subsidies for newspaper outlets.¹³

Yet, national and local media, both in Sweden and internationally, are threatened. Global, internet-based actors are now competing for audience and ad revenue.¹⁴

In Sweden, daily newspaper revenues have shrunk by 30 percent over the past ten years,¹⁵ mainly due to diminishing advertisement revenues.¹⁶ Since 2008, these have decreased with an average of half a billion SEK per year.¹⁷ Although income from digital advertising is increasing, by 110 million SEK (5 percent) in 2018, it does not make up for the great loss of earnings in printed newspapers.¹⁸

At the same time, the number of subscribers is declining, with an industry average of about 1 percent per year (2018).¹⁹ This reduction in the number of subscribers has been ongoing since the beginning of the 1990's,²⁰ and the proportion of 25-44 year olds that live in a household with a newspaper subscription has shrunk from 56 percent in 2008, to 30 percent in 2018, despite the recent increase in digital subscriptions.²¹

¹³ Regeringskansliet. Medier.

¹⁴ Ohlsson. *Medieutveckling 2019 – Medieekonomi*. 2019. p. 4

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 39

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 6

¹⁷ Truedson, Lars. *Mediestudiers årsbok – Tillståndet för journalistiken 2017/2018*. Institutet för mediestudier. 2018. p. 9

¹⁸ Ohlsson. *Medieutveckling 2019 – Medieekonomi*. 2019. p. 37

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 34

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 33

²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 34-35

The small city and countryside press has borne the larger part of the industry's loss of profits.²² Their proportion of digital subscribers was only at 19 percent in 2018. Though rapidly rising from 13 percent the year before,²³ it is not enough to offset the decline in the number of print subscribers. Meanwhile, the economic situations of the metropolitan newspapers (Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö) are less dire.²⁴ *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, for example, report 42 and 48 percent of subscribers being digital (2018).²⁵

In addition to the increase in digital subscriptions, the drop in print revenue has been countered with continuous and massive cost cuts.²⁶ Austerity measures range from adopting new technology and making work processes more efficient, to making straight cuts in the number of employees and spreading overhead costs by consolidating into larger business groups.²⁷ Despite this, the industry experienced its most difficult year in 2018, with industry wide operating margins at -2,2 percent.²⁸

The five largest local and regional newspaper groups currently own 90 percent of the titles, representing 90 percent of the issues printed.²⁹ In the Swedish daily newspaper industry, the number of employed journalists has decreased by 24 percent between 2013 and 2019.³⁰ According to a survey, almost 40 percent of Swedish newspaper editors believe that the number of employed journalists will continue to decrease the coming two years.³¹

²² Ohlsson. *Medieutveckling 2019 – Medieekonomi*. p. 38

²³ Ibid. p. 35

²⁴ Ibid. p. 42

²⁵ Ibid. p.36

²⁶ Ibid. p. 39

²⁷ Ibid. p. 39

²⁸ Ibid. p. 41

²⁹ Ibid. p. 36

³⁰ Nygren, Gunnar and Nord, Karolina Olga. Svenska nyhetsredaktioner 2019: Krympande redaktioner – nätverksproduktion och läsardata i centrum. In *Mediestudiers årsbok 2019*. Truedson, Lars (ed.). 2019. p. 22

³¹ Ibid. p. 46

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Decline and Change

One way to describe the current situation of many newspaper companies is as a *subtractive change*. In contrast to the well-researched field of *additive change* (acquisitions, mergers, etc), *subtractive change* (elimination of units, divestment, downsizing, etc)³² is understudied and in need of theoretical development.³³ Subtractive change can also be more difficult to plan for and to manage than additive change.³⁴ In the newspaper industry, the subtractive change is not confined to only one or a few organizations – the whole industry is declining.

A declining industry has been defined as an industry which has experienced a drop in unit sales over a prolonged period. The decline can therefore not be ascribed to short-term issues such as a shortage in resources, implying that firms must develop strategies in order to survive.³⁵ This is the case in the newspaper industry.

Decline can further occur in several different ways, resulting in disparate challenges and divergent suitable responses for management.³⁶ Within Zammuto and Cameron's typology of decline, the decline of the Swedish newspaper industry is best described as a *Dissolution* (the industry is *dissolving*), which means decline is continuous and stems from a change in consumer behaviour which alters the shape of the niche.³⁷ As explained above, the newspaper industry has continuously declined since the early 1990's, and the shape of the niche is developing from printed newspapers to digital news distribution because consumer preferences are changing. This diminishes the profitability of the printed newspapers. The continuous and

³² Corley, Kevin G. and Gioia, Dennis A. Identity Ambiguity and Change in the Wake of a Corporate Spin-Off. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Vol. 49, nr. 2, 2004: 173-208. p. 174

³³ Ibid. p. 174

³⁴ Ibid. p. 174

³⁵ Porter, Michael E. *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*. Free Press. 1998. p. 254

³⁶ Zammuto, Raymond F. and Cameron, Kim S. Environmental Decline and Organizational Response. *Academy of Management Proceedings*. 1982. p. 252

³⁷ Ibid. p. 251

incremental nature of the decline further makes the process relatively predictable.

Industrial decline creates strenuous circumstances within which leaders must make prudent decisions despite limited resources and shortened time horizons.³⁸ The literature on declining industries is fragmented,³⁹ but research has shown that organizations experiencing decline are often also challenged with low employee morale, high employee turnover, resistance to change, loss of financial slack, and reduced leadership credibility.⁴⁰ This directs our attention to the role of editors-in-chief.

1.2.2 The Role of Editor-in-Chief

Research on the role of leaders in media, including newspapers, is rather scarce.⁴¹ There is little knowledge, for example, of how editors-in-chief understand the *raison d'être* of their organization.⁴²

Leadership in the newspaper industry differs from that in other industries as leaders must strive towards journalistic and democratic as well as managerial and business ideals.⁴³ They have to ensure that the journalists produce qualitative journalism fulfilling their democratic and societal role, while at the same time being profitable (enough).⁴⁴

Traditionally, leadership has therefore often been divided, with an editor-in-chief responsible for the editorial product, and a

³⁸ Cameron, Kim S., Whetten, David A. and Kim, Myung U. Organizational Dysfunctions of Decline. *The Academy of Management Journal*. Vol. 30, nr. 1, 1987. p. 127

³⁹ Lamberg, Juha-Antti, Ojala, Jari and Peltoniemi, Mirva. Thinking about industry decline: A qualitative meta-analysis and future research directions. *Business History*. Vol. 60, nr 2. 2018. p. 141

⁴⁰ Cameron, Kim, Kim, Myung and Whetten, David. Organizational Effects of Decline and Turbulence. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Vol. 32, nr. 2, 1987. 222-240. pp. 225, 234

⁴¹ Djerf Pierre and Weibull. *Ledarskap i framgångsrika tidningsföretag : en studie av tidningsledarna på Borås tidning, Nya Wermlands-tidningen, Sundsvalls tidning, Barometern och Jönköpings-posten under 180 år*. 2009. p. 14

⁴² Djerf Pierre, Monica and Weibull, Lennart. From idealist-entrepreneur to corporate executive: Provincial newspaper editors' and publishers' ways-of-thinking from the mid-1800s to the present. *Journalism Studies* Vol. 12, nr. 3, 2011. p. 297

⁴³ Andersson, Ulrika, Waldenström, Amanda and Wiik, Jenny. *Profession möter management. Den journalistiska värdegrundens förhandling på svenska morgontidningar*. Göteborgs universitet, Institutionen för journalistik, medier och kommunikation. 2018. p. 24

⁴⁴ Killebrew (2002), as referred in Ibid. p. 24

CEO responsible for the business side.⁴⁵ These different parts of the organization have usually been clearly separated, both physically and socially.⁴⁶

The effects of digitalisation, however, have brought on a gradual but radical change to this structure.⁴⁷ The strict separation between the business-department and the editorial office has ceded to make way for more cooperation,⁴⁸ especially between managers.⁴⁹ To cope with the challenging environment, editors-in-chief declare an increase in expectations for them to be professional and to possess business skills.⁵⁰ The emphasis of newspaper leadership has shifted towards business goals such as standardisation, economy, and evaluation.⁵¹ The editors-in-chief further see an organization-wide necessity for a more audience-oriented approach to the journalistic work.⁵²

Moreover, most studies show that the demanding situation of the industry, and the move towards more business inclined editors, has resulted in higher importance attributed to leadership. In addition, both editors and journalists think that editors' influence on journalists' work has increased.⁵³

1.2.3 Research Gap

Previous sections have shown how the democratically important newspaper industry is undergoing rapid change and decline. This has brought on an increasing importance of, and concentration of power to, the editors-in-chief. Still, there is little research on the role of editors-in-chief. Within the field of

⁴⁵ Djerf Pierre and Weibull. *Ledarskap i framgångsrika tidningsföretag : en studie av tidningsledarna på Borås tidning, Nya Wermlands-tidningen, Sundsvalls tidning, Barometern och Jönköpings-posten under 180 år*. 2009. pp. 22-23

⁴⁶ Andersson, Waldenström, and Wiik. *Profession möter management. Den journalistiska värdegrundens förhandling på svenska morgontidningar*. 2018. p. 23

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 23-24

⁴⁸ Raviola, Elena. Exploring organizational framings: Journalism and business management in newspaper organizations. *Information, Communication & Society: Transforming tensions: legacy media towards participation and collaboration*. Vol. 15, nr. 6, 2012. pp. 934-938, 942-943

⁴⁹ Andersson, Waldenström, and Wiik. *Profession möter management. Den journalistiska värdegrundens förhandling på svenska morgontidningar*. 2018. p. 24

⁵⁰ Andersson, Ulrika and Wiik, Jenny. New Demands on Editorial Leadership: Perceived Changes in Swedish Newspaper Management. *Observatorio (OBS*)*. Vol. 8, nr 2, 2014. pp. 7-8

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 9

⁵² Andersson, Ulrika. Increased focus on audience studies creates dividing lines at Swedish news desks. *IAMCR 2009 Conference*. Mexico City. 2009.

⁵³ Andersson, Waldenström, and Wiik. *Profession möter management. Den journalistiska värdegrundens förhandling på svenska morgontidningar*. 2018. pp. 23-31, 79-84

media studies, further research on that subject is therefore needed to deepen the understanding of the newspaper industry. In addition, research on decline and subtractive change is fragmented, making leadership in the newspaper industry an interesting subject in the academic context of leadership. This study will thus be able to make an empirical contribution to the literature on journalism in general, and on the role of editors-in-chief specifically. In addition, the study will give a theoretical contribution to the literature on leadership in declining industries.

1.3 Purpose of Study and Research Question

The increased importance attributed to leadership is an integral part of the changing newspaper industry. Understanding how editors perceive the evolution of the industry and the position of their newspaper, as well as the role of their leadership, is therefore vital to understand the development of the newspaper industry as a whole.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how editors-in-chief of Swedish daily newspapers cope with the turbulent environment and continuous decline of the newspaper industry. Based on previous research and the context, we ask the following research question:

How do editors of contemporary Swedish daily newspapers construct and communicate their reality in terms of threats and solutions in the context of a declining industry?

1.3.1 Scope

The overall context is an industry in decline, and the effects of this decline on the actors in the industry. Our research subjects are liable editors, that hold the titles of editor-in-chief or publisher, of regional and local daily newspapers in Sweden.

The choice to confine our study to Sweden was obvious in terms of accessibility and resources. Furthermore, the larger national and metropolitan newspapers have not been as affected by the

decline as local and regional newspapers, making the latter more suitable to study. In addition, due to the restricted number of large big city newspapers, sampling from them would also make anonymisation difficult. We therefore chose to sample from local and regional daily newspapers.

1.3.1.1 Definition of the Term *Daily Newspaper*

According to Swedish law, a daily newspaper is defined as: A general newspaper with regular news services or general shaping of political opinion, that delivers at least one issue per week.⁵⁴ This is the definition used in this study.

1.3.1.2 Definition of the Terms *Liable Editor, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher*

The Swedish freedom of the press is based on a system with *liable editors* (ansvarig utgivare). The *liable editor* is a physical person who is assigned legal responsibility for everything that is published by a printed or digital title, no matter the author.⁵⁵ The position is often held by the editor-in-chief or publisher.

An editor-in-chief (chefredaktör) is the top manager of the newspaper. Traditionally she has been the liable editor, without responsibility for the business side of the organization. Nowadays she may however also have economic responsibility.⁵⁶ A publisher is a relatively new term in Sweden which is used to describe the top manager of both the editorial and the business side of the organization.⁵⁷

As there are no clear definitions, we will use the more common term editor-in-chief, or simply editor, to describe both publishers and editors-in-chief that hold the position of liable editor.

⁵⁴ SFS 1990:524. *Presstödsförordningen*, 1 Kap, 6 §. 1990.

⁵⁵ Myndigheten för press, radio och tv. *Ansvarig utgivare*, Feb 5, 2019.

<https://www.mprt.se/sv/att-sanda/krav-och-regler/ansvarig-utgivare/> (Retrieved May 5 2020)

⁵⁶ Djerf Pierre and Weibull. *Ledarskap i framgångsrika tidningsföretag : en studie av tidningsledarna på Borås tidning, Nya Wermlands-tidningen, Sundsvalls tidning, Barometern och Jönköpings-posten under 180 år*. 2009. p. 23

⁵⁷ Nationalencyklopedin. *Publisher*. <http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/publisher>. (Retrieved May 5, 2020)

Even though we talk of editors as the “leaders of newspapers”, we acknowledge that there might be other individuals holding leadership status alongside editors, formally or informally.

2 Theoretical Framework

The process of interest is the construction and communication of the editors’ reality in terms of threats and solutions – meaning the way in which threats to the newspaper and potential ways to handle them are perceived, conceptualised, and communicated to employees. To investigate this we use the theory of sensemaking in general, and its concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving specifically. Based on the research on sensemaking and sensegiving during organizational crisis and organizational change we build a model for the analysis of the sensemaking and sensegiving process in the dissolving newspaper industry.

2.1 Sensemaking and Sensegiving

2.1.1 Definitions

2.1.1.1 Sensemaking in Organizations

According to Maitlis and Christianson, sensemaking is “a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn”.⁵⁸

In other words: Sensemaking is an individual as well as social process,⁵⁹ triggered by situations that are uncertain or ambiguous.⁶⁰ It involves the interpretation of experience into frames of meaning,⁶¹ that serve to reduce uncertainty and enable action.⁶²

⁵⁸ Maitlis, Sally and Christianson, Marlys. Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. *Academy of Management Annals* Vol. 8, nr 1, 2014: 57-125. p. 67

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 66

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 70

⁶¹ Maitlis, Sally and Sonenshein, Scott. Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights From Weick (1988). *Journal of Management Studies*. Vol. 47, nr. 3, 2010: 551-580. pp. 551-552

⁶² Weick, Karl E, Sutcliffe, Kathleen and Obstfeld, David. Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking. *Organization Science*. Vol. 16, nr. 4, 2005: 409-421. p. 409

Sensemaking is used to understand individuals in situations of novelty, uncertainty and ambiguity.⁶³ It is hence a widely used theory for understanding processes during crisis and organizational change,⁶⁴ and therefore a suitable theory for analysing the declining newspaper industry.⁶⁵

2.1.1.2 Sensegiving in Organizations

As defined by Gioia and Chittipeddi, sensegiving is the "process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality".⁶⁶ It is triggered by the "perception or anticipation of a gap in organizational sensemaking processes".⁶⁷ Several studies have defined sensegiving as an activity not only common, but also critically important for implementing change in organizations.^{68, 69, 70}

2.1.2 Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Declining Industries

Despite extensive searching, we find no research conducted on sensemaking theory in declining industries.⁷¹ We therefore look to the adjacent areas of sensemaking during organizational crisis and change to find conceptualisations of sensemaking that are applicable to our case.

⁶³ Maitlis, Christianson. Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. 2014. p. 58

⁶⁴ Ibid p. 71

⁶⁵ See the section "2.1 The Swedish Newspaper Industry"

⁶⁶ Gioia, Dennis and Chittipeddi, Kumar. Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Strategic Change Initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*. Vol. 12, nr. 6, 1991: 433-448. p. 442

⁶⁷ Maitlis, Thomas. Triggers and enablers of sensegiving in organizations. *The Academy of Management Journal*. Vol. 50, nr.1, 2007: 57-84. p. 58

⁶⁸ Maitlis and Christianson. Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. 2014. p. 67

⁶⁹ Dunford, Richard and Jones, Helen. Narrative in strategic change. *Human Relations; Thousand Oaks*. Vol. 53, nr. 9, 2000: 1207-1226

⁷⁰ Gioia and Chittipeddi. Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Strategic Change Initiation. 1991.

⁷¹ Search terms that have been used in ABI Inform, Business Source Premier and Google Scholar: Sensemaking AND declining industr*, sensemaking AND industrial decline, sensemaking AND organizational decline, sensemaking AND decline, sensemaking AND prolonged crisis, sensemaking AND long time crisis, sensemaking AND enduring crisis, sensemaking AND long crisis, sensemaking AND transformation, sensemaking AND rupture, sensemaking AND subtractive change

Result: No relevant research has been found.

2.1.3 Sensemaking and Sensegiving During Organizational Crisis and Change

Earlier literature has defined five common traits of organizational crises: They: (1) are very ambiguous situations, creating a sensemaking process; (2) have low probability, yet threatens the survival of the organization; (3) are time constrained, prompting leaders to make quick decisions; (4) disrupt the present situation of the organization, prompting a decision that will lead to change; and (5) change relationships between members and leaders, as leaders gain authority during the crisis.⁷²

For newspapers, the crisis is caused by the dissolution of the industry, which is not evolving rapidly (3), and is not a low probability event (2). The literature on sensemaking in crisis may thus not be perfectly applicable. However, all other traits are shared. In addition, traits are not obligatory, as Maitlis and Sonenshein states; “a crisis can also be enacted very slowly”.⁷³

When a crisis evolves over several years, as the dissolution of the newspaper business, the absence of a strict time constraint and the relative predictability means there should be time for organizations to respond to the crisis in a structured way, rather than just “extinguishing fires”. Therefore, literature on sensemaking during organizational change may be a good complement to literature on sensemaking in organizational crisis.

Organizational change has been characterised (though not unchallenged⁷⁴) as starting by unfreezing the present level of behaviour, continuing by moving to a new level, and then concluding with refreezing group life at the new level.⁷⁵ The process of change can evolve incrementally over many years, or be swift and disrupting “the order of the understood world”.⁷⁶

⁷² Bandeira-de- Mello, Rodrigo. The Leadership Process During an Organizational Crisis. *Journal of Operations and Supply Chain Management*. Vol. 9, nr. 1, 2016: 94-109. p. 96

⁷³ Maitlis, Sonenshein. Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights From Weick (1988). 2010. p. 552

⁷⁴ Burnes, Bernard. The Origins of Lewin's Three-Step Model of Change. *The Journal of applied behavioral science*. Vol. 56, nr. 1, 2020: 32-59. p. 3

⁷⁵ Ibid p. 3

⁷⁶ Corley, Kevin G. and Gioia, Dennis A. Identity Ambiguity and Change in the Wake of a Corporate Spin-Off. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 2004. Vol.49(2) 173-208. p. 173

The movement of the newspaper industry from an ad financed print product to a digital product based on subscriptions has been going on for many years.

In order to create change, the organizational identity must often be reshaped.⁷⁷ organizational identity is here understood as central, enduring and distinctive attributes that serve to answer questions such as “who are we as an organization?”.⁷⁸ If the organizational identity is threatened, collective action becomes difficult.⁷⁹

Organizational change and organizational crisis, have common traits and have therefore been described together as “turbulent contexts”.⁸⁰ For that reason, we will from now on describe the processes of sensemaking during organizational crisis, and organizational change, together.

2.1.3.1 Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Turbulent Contexts

As described, sensemaking is triggered by the perception of a situation as novel, uncertain or ambiguous.⁸¹

A certain form of ambiguity, which is common in turbulent contexts, is ambiguity related to the organizational identity. Such ambiguity is created when members recognise the image of who the company is as not being consistent with (1) how it is perceived by others, (2) with past understandings of the company’s identity, or 3) with a desired or necessary future organizational identity. These ambiguities related to identity are jointly referred to as identity discrepancies.⁸²

In an organization experiencing turbulent contexts, the ambiguity, regardless of form, creates the need for a shared

⁷⁷ Maitlis, Sonenshein. Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights From Weick (1988). 2010. p. 560

⁷⁸ Whetten, David A. Albert and Whetten Revisited: Strengthening the Concept of Organizational Identity. *Journal of Management Inquiry*. Vol. 15, nr. 3, 2006: 219-234. pp. 220-221

⁷⁹ Maitlis, Sonenshein. Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights From Weick (1988). 2010. p. 563

⁸⁰ Maitlis, Sonenshein. Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights From Weick (1988). 2010. p. 552

⁸¹ Maitlis, Christianson. Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. 2014. p. 70

⁸² Corley, Gioia. Identity Ambiguity and Change in the Wake of a Corporate Spin-Off. 2004. p. 204

understanding of the situation^{83,84} and/or a redefinition of the organizational identity, to enable collective action.⁸⁵ This is a starting point for the sensemaking process.

As organizational members experience ambiguity and uncertainty, research shows they will turn to their leaders,^{86,87} demanding them to “reconstruct a credible and consistent narrative for internal and external audiences, helping members rebuild their sense of who they are as an organization”.⁸⁸ This demand is called the “sensegiving imperative”.⁸⁹

At the same time, individuals have a strong tendency to hold on to their expectations, and to act accordingly. This creates a risk of not becoming aware in time when circumstances change.⁹⁰ Major changes in organizational identity can lead to resistance to the change, when members of the organization perceive it as making it difficult for them to answer questions about who they are.⁹¹ Similarly, negative emotions such as fear, guilt or sadness are ubiquitous within organizations facing turbulent contexts⁹² and bear a strong risk of hindering sensemaking and sensegiving.⁹³

The leaders on their part need to first understand what is going on, *sensemaking*,⁹⁴ and then reduce uncertainty by communicating to his or her employees a trustworthy account of what is happening and why, and what needs to be done or how the identity must change, *sensegiving*.⁹⁵ For example by using storytelling⁹⁶ or arranging meetings to “espouse” one’s vision.⁹⁷ Leaders “must get others to accept their definition of the

⁸³Maitlis, Christianson. Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. 2014. pp. 71-73

⁸⁴ Weick, Karl E. *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1995 pp. 91-95

⁸⁵ Maitlis, Sonenshein. Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights From Weick (1988). 2010. pp. 560, 563

⁸⁶ Corley, Gioia. Identity Ambiguity and Change in the Wake of a Corporate Spin-Off. 2004. pp. 194-196

⁸⁷ Bandeira-de- Mello. The Leadership Process During an Organizational Crisis. 2016. p. 99

⁸⁸ Ravasi, Davide and Schultz, Majken. Responding to Organizational Identity Threats: Exploring the Role of Organizational Culture. *The Academy of Management Journal*. Vol. 49, nr. 3, 2006: 433-458. p. 448

⁸⁹ Corley, Gioia. Identity Ambiguity and Change in the Wake of a Corporate Spin-Off. 2004. p. 194

⁹⁰ Maitlis, Sonenshein. Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights From Weick (1988). 2010. p. 564

⁹¹ Ibid pp. 563-564

⁹² Ibid p. 566

⁹³ Ibid pp. 567-568

⁹⁴ Bandeira-de- Mello. The Leadership Process During an Organizational Crisis. 2016. pp. 98-99

⁹⁵ Maitlis, Christianson. Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. 2014. pp. 89-90

⁹⁶ Dunford, Jones. Narrative in strategic change. 2000. pp. 1222-1224

⁹⁷ Gioia and Chittipeddi. Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Strategic Change Initiation. 1991. p. 442

situation, imputing ‘meaning’ to the unfolding crisis in such a way that their efforts to manage it are enhanced”.⁹⁸ The emphasis is therefore on a consistent and fruitful narrative, not necessarily a true one.⁹⁹

Research has also shown that initiatives of change often reflect the values of leaders, or at least are understood by the leader in a way that makes sense to her.¹⁰⁰ A very strong commitment to a certain set of meanings may however create blind spots which makes adaptation difficult when the environment changes.¹⁰¹

At the same time, strong public commitment and a compelling vision from the part of the leader is generally seen as a critical part of a successful change, as it makes it possible for members to understand the new direction of the organization in a way that makes drastic change possible.¹⁰²

2.2 A Model for Sensemaking and Sensegiving during Dissolving Industrial Decline

Based on the research reviewed in the previous section we set up a model of sensemaking during dissolving industrial decline. The model is later used to analyse the empirical material.

1. *Perception of turbulent contexts:* The changing and turbulent environment is perceived as uncertain and ambiguous by members and threatens the existence of the organization. A common form of ambiguity in turbulent contexts is caused by *identity discrepancies*. That is, current perceptions of ‘who the company is’ does not match with: (1) how it is perceived by others, (2) past identities or (3) the perceived direction of the company's identity.

2. *Sensemaking need:* The triggers mentioned above create the need for (1) a shared understanding of the situation which

⁹⁸ Bandeira-de- Mello. The Leadership Process During an Organizational Crisis. 2016. p. 99

⁹⁹ Weick. *Sensemaking in organizations*. 1995. pp. 55-61

¹⁰⁰ Gioia and Chittipeddi. Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Strategic Change Initiation. 1991. p. 433

¹⁰¹ Maitlis, Sonenshein. Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights From Weick (1988). 2010. pp. 562-563

¹⁰² Ibid p. 562

enables collective action, and/or (2) a redefinition of the organizational identity to enable collective action.

3. *Sensemaking imperative*: Organizational members then turn to their leaders to be provided with a coherent and comprehensive view of the situation and the way forward.
4. *Leaders' sensemaking*: Leaders try to understand the situation and/or redefine the organizational identity in a way that makes sense to them and helps them manage the situation. Preferably it also reflects the leaders' values.
5. *Sensegiving*: The result of the leaders' sensemaking is then presented to members as to reduce uncertainty and make the situation easier to manage by enabling collective action. Sensegiving might be executed by different means, such as storytelling or the holding of meetings to espouse one's vision.

It should be noted that organizational identity surfaces in the model in several ways. In step one identity discrepancies can be seen as triggers of the sensemaking process. In steps two and four the need to redefine organizational identity becomes an objective. Identity is furthermore viewed as an influence on the sensemaking process in general, working both as a trigger and as an impeding force.

3 Study design

Deciding on a study design could be argued to be a sensemaking exercise in and of itself.¹⁰³ We face uncertainty and construct frames of meaning by formulating a research question and choosing a research method. Moreover, by framing our research question in terms of how understanding is socially constructed, we implicitly assume an ontology of constructionism.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Allard-Poesi, Florence. The Paradox of Sensemaking in Organizational Analysis. *Organization*. Vol. 12, nr. 2, 2005: 169-196. p. 183

¹⁰⁴ Bryman, Alan and Bell, Emma. *Business research methods*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. p.

Building on this, we assume that our interview subjects have constructed their understanding based on the interpretation of context, and coloured by previous experiences. In the same vein, we will interpret those interviews, and construct our understanding. Our epistemology is therefore interpretivism.¹⁰⁵

Our research question led us to sensegiving theory, which informed our data gathering process. After a few interviews, our increased understanding enabled us to discern the most useful parts of sensemaking theory for our purposes, which further informed our data gathering, and so on. Alternating between data and theory in this iterative way is consistent with an abductive approach.¹⁰⁶

3.1 Empirical Research

3.1.1 Qualitative Strategy

In order to understand how the editors-in-chief understand their world, we found it suitable to use a qualitative strategy, common within the perspectives and approaches described above.¹⁰⁷ The flexibility of the strategy further makes it suitable for research in the unexplored field of the role of editors-in-chief in the declining newspaper industry.¹⁰⁸

3.1.2 Cross-Sectional Design

Our study entails the need for data from more than one editor and the collection of data during a narrow time-frame. The empirical research design employed can therefore be described as cross-sectional.¹⁰⁹

3.1.3 Semi-Structured Interview Method

Being interested in individuals' own interpretation of reality, we wanted rich and deep data, and therefore chose to conduct

¹⁰⁵ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 16

¹⁰⁶ Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. *Research Methods for Business Students*. London: Pearson Education Limited, 2012. p. 155

¹⁰⁷ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 386

¹⁰⁸ Djerf Pierre and Weibull. *Ledarskap i framgångsrika tidningsföretag : en studie av tidningsledarna på Borås tidning, Nya Wermlands-tidningen, Sundsvalls tidning, Barometern och Jönköpings-posten under 180 år*. 2009. p. 14

¹⁰⁹ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 54

qualitative in-depth interviews.¹¹⁰ Given the purpose, unstructured interviews would have been an advisable method. However, as there was more than one person involved in conducting the interviews and we wanted comparability of interview style, the more structured, but still flexible, semi-structured interview, was more suitable.¹¹¹ It gives room for adjusting and responding to the issues the respondent wants to emphasise, thus providing opportunity to gain insight into what the interviewee considers important and relevant,¹¹² and is therefore well suited for research in how people perceive their situation.¹¹³

3.1.4 Gathering the Empirical Data

3.1.4.1 Choice of Interview Subjects

A complete view of the question in study, depends on a wide assortment of perspectives.¹¹⁴ Therefore, we ensured access to 15 editors-in-chief, responsible for newspapers from different parts of Sweden, having an affiliation to either the social democrat, liberal, conservative or the center party ideologies, and belonging to four out of five major local and regional newspaper groups.¹¹⁵ We also made sure to have an equal distribution of female and male editors-in-chief, seven and eight respectively. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees either were, or had until recently been, editors-in-chief.

As there are not very many editors-in-chief, they are easily identifiable. To ensure anonymity, we are therefore not providing more detailed information. To make the distribution of quotations in the data section transparent, editors are given individual female codenames.¹¹⁶

3.1.4.2 Contact and Correspondence

We used our official SSE student emails, and wrote “Intervjuförfrågan Handelshögskolan i Stockholm” (Request for

¹¹⁰ Bryman, Alan. *Social research methods*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. p. 470

¹¹¹ Bryman. *Social research methods*. 2012. p. 472

¹¹² Bryman. *Social research methods*. 2012. p. 470

¹¹³ Esaiasson, Peter, Gilljam, Mikael, Oscarsson, Henrik, Towns, Ann and Wängnerud, Lena. *Metodpraktikan: konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad*. 4 edn. Stockholm: Norstedts juridik. 2012. p. 253

¹¹⁴ Bryman. *Social research methods*. 2012. p. 416

¹¹⁵ Ohlsson. *Medieutveckling 2019 – Medieekonomi*. 2019. p. 36.

¹¹⁶ Agneta, Britta, Cecilia, Dagmar, Elin, Frida, Gunnel, Hedvig, Ingrid, Johanna, Karin, Lovisa, Maja, Nanna, Olga

interview *Stockholm School of Economics*) as the e-mail subject. 15 out of 20 contacted agreed to participate.

3.1.4.3 Planned Interview Structure

To make the interviews comparable we created a brief interview guide with a number of topics.¹¹⁷ Interviewees generally touched on most topics unprompted, but the guide nonetheless helped ensure a full picture of each editor's understanding of the situation.

3.1.4.4 Performing the Interviews

Our intention was to conduct the interviews at the editorial office of each editor-in-chief, to deepen our understanding of the context. The first five interviews were therefore conducted in person: three at the editorial office, one in the home of the editor-in-chief, and one at SSE premises. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the subsequent ten interviews were held by phone.

The first three interviews were held by both of us together to get a common understanding of the interview process. Due to cost of travelling, and technical difficulties in performing a phone interview with two interviewers, the remaining interviews were held by only one of us.

The interviews were recorded, with consent from interviewees, and lasted between 33 and 80 minutes (average of 58 minutes).

3.2 Method for Presentation and Analysis of Data

3.2.1 Empirical Analysis and Presentation: Narratives

For the empirical analysis and presentation of our data, we chose a narrative method. It is based on the assumption that people use language and stories as a way to construct and understand themselves and their world, as well as a means to communicate their understanding to others.¹¹⁸ It is also

¹¹⁷ See Annex I – Interview Guide

¹¹⁸ Eriksson, Pivi and Kovalainen, Anne. *Qualitative methods in business research*. London: SAGE. 2008. p. 2

congruent with our ontological and epistemological premises¹¹⁹ and fitting for studies of organizational sensemaking.¹²⁰

By narratives, we mean personal and collective narratives, where personal narratives are recollections of individuals own experiences,¹²¹ and collective narratives are shared and co-created stories.¹²²

Narrative analysis in organizational studies might take different forms, and we adhere to the approach of *collection and analysis of stories told by people*.¹²³ We focus on the meaning, “the content of the narrative”,¹²⁴ while at the same time paying attention to the co-narrated and co-constructed constitution of narratives.¹²⁵

We examined the personal narratives told by the editors-in-chief in order to find recurrent themes that could be merged to a collective narrative. By themes we mean “a concept, trend, idea, or distinction that emerges from the empirical data”.¹²⁶

After transcription, the interviews were analysed by us separately to assure a greater reliability of the themes found. We then compared and discussed our findings and together structured the composed collective narrative based on the individual findings. This collective narrative becomes the presentation of our data.

As the interviews were held in Swedish, and the thesis had to be written in English, the quotes of the editors-in-chief have been translated. This entails of course an amount of interpretation and may thus impair the dependability of the study. To mitigate it, the editors have read both their quotes and our translation of them and been able to object to any misinterpretation.

¹¹⁹ Eriksson and Kovalainen. *Qualitative methods in business research*. 2008. p. 2

¹²⁰ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 531

¹²¹ Riessman, 1993, as referred in Eriksson and Kovalainen. *Qualitative methods in business research*. 2008. p. 4

¹²² Rappaport, 1995, as referred in Eriksson and Kovalainen. *Qualitative methods in business research*. 2008. p. 5

¹²³ Czarniawska, 1998, as referred in Eriksson and Kovalainen. *Qualitative methods in business research*. 2008. p.

5

¹²⁴ Eriksson and Kovalainen. *Qualitative methods in business research*. 2008. p. 10

¹²⁵ Elliott, 2005, as referred in Eriksson and Kovalainen. *Qualitative methods in business research*. 2008. p. 11

¹²⁶ Eriksson and Kovalainen. *Qualitative methods in business research*. 2008. p. 10

3.2.2 Theoretical Analysis: Sensemaking

The collective empirical narrative, with its constituent thoughts, actions, and activities, was then analysed and explained based on the model for sensemaking in a dissolving industry, which we set up in the theory section.

3.3 Critique of Methods

There are many thoughts on how qualitative research should be evaluated. Considering our constructivist perspective, we use the criteria suggested by Guba and Lincoln.¹²⁷

3.3.1 Credibility

Following our choice to study the sparsely researched field of the role of the editor-in-chief, we did not have much earlier literature to base our study on. This also means that the literature we did use has been less scrutinized than literature from a more well-researched field, therefore having a larger risk of containing faults.

A similar critique can be raised against the fields of subtractive change and declining industries. In those fields, the scarcity of earlier research also means we have had to rely on old studies, whose relevance may have decreased.

Given our interest in the editors' understanding of their situation, we chose to use the theory of sensemaking. As there was no earlier research on sensemaking in declining industries, we combined studies on sensemaking in organizational crisis, and in organizational change to create a new framework for analysis. There is therefore no earlier research that can confirm that our theoretical framework is well adapted to the question under study. When developing a theoretical framework, there is also a risk that one builds in preconceived notions and ideas. By performing the interviews over the course of six weeks, while simultaneously developing the theoretical framework we have however been able to ensure a certain level of accordance between observations and concepts, contributing to the

¹²⁷ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 395

*credibility*¹²⁸ of our research. We have further enhanced it by letting editors corroborate their quotes.

It is also possible that another theoretical framework would have been more suitable. Following the focus on the journalistic/managerial divide in earlier research, using institutional theory could have been easier and provided interesting insights.

By doing research into these previously understudied fields, we are however ameliorating the prospects for future research.

3.3.2 Transferability

The newspaper industry is particular, not least because of the leadership's dual missions, and the results may thus not be *transferable*¹²⁹ to other industries. In light of the study design – sampling a cross-section of editors for interviews – the research also represents only a minor part of editors' perspectives in Sweden. Broadening the perspectives drawn from in the research, both in terms of sample size and different methods (surveys, observations), could certainly have benefited the transferability of results. However, given the limited time and resources, such limitations were necessary. Another way to get information on the role of editors-in-chief could have been to use a different design, for example interviewing employees working at newspapers or conducting observations at editorial offices. Considering the thickness of the data presented, as well as the diversity and size of the sample studied, we nevertheless believe our results to be transferable to the larger group of editors-in-chief of Swedish local and regional daily newspapers.

3.3.3 Dependability

To make our process *dependable*¹³⁰ we have kept detailed records of all the stages of our research, and extensively described our method. It might still be difficult to reproduce the same results however, since as interviewers we co-create the

¹²⁸ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 396

¹²⁹ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 398

¹³⁰ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 398

interviewees' narration,¹³¹ and interviewer effect¹³² is an integrated part of our method. Furthermore, sensitive information, such as conflicts and financial problems, could be underreported in our data, causing bias.¹³³ Moreover, Molander is affiliated with a competing newspaper, and respondents knowing this may tailor their answers. To make the interview situations more comparable, and assure interviewees all knew what they agreed to, we wrote clearly in the first e-mail that Molander is the editor of the editorial section of *Vestmanlands Läns Tidning* (VLT) albeit currently on leave.

Given that five out of 20 invited editors-in-chief did not answer or accept to participate in the study, their omission from the sample could constitute another source of bias, especially if they hold views that differ from those that accepted, for example more sensitive views.

3.3.4 Confirmability

To ensure *confirmability*,¹³⁴ we have been wary of how our own values and backgrounds affect the study. It is possible that our choice to focus on editors was influenced by the fact that we are students at SSE, a school with a culture of educating leaders. The main inspiration for the choice of study and research question was, however, Molander's professional background in the industry. Her background has benefited the study with a richer understanding of the subject, but might also have had a biasing effect. Gustavsson's lack of similar background might have mitigated this by providing a contrasting perspective. Analyzing data and drawing conclusions individually in order to overcome internal biases also contributes to the study's confirmability.

Guba and Lincoln also emphasize *authenticity*¹³⁵ as an important criterion, however it is controversial and has not been

¹³¹ Elliott, 2005, as referred in Eriksson and Kovalainen. *Qualitative methods in business research*. 2008. p. 7

¹³² Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 232

¹³³ Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson, Towns, and Wängnerud. *Metodpraktikan: konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad*. 2012. p. 235

¹³⁴ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 398

¹³⁵ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 398

influential.¹³⁶ We have therefore decided not to consider it in this thesis.

3.3.5 Ethical Considerations

We have continually assessed the ethical aspects of our study.¹³⁷ *Harm to participants* was avoided by offering anonymity and the possibility to read quotations. Participants were informed of the purpose and design of the study before accepting to participate, and we answered any additional questions to assure *informed consent* and the absence of *deception*. To avoid *invasion of privacy*, we also asked whether the interviewees agreed to be recorded, which they all did.

4 Data - A Narrative Structure

In all the conducted interviews, the overarching narrative of a slow moving industry-wide crisis is evident. The editors-in-chief describe a decline mainly grounded in two factors that affect the economic realities: a worsening of the ad-business, and a decline in the number of subscribers, the reader-business.

4.1 It's the Economy, Stupid

The rapidly shrinking ad-business is widely held as the main factor in explaining the industry's current predicaments. All editors speak of a rapidly shrinking ad-business over the last decade. In Hedvig's words: "Last year we suffered an enormous loss of ad-revenue, something like 15-16 percent". "Facebook and Google have taken enormously from our ad-revenue", Britta says, highlighting one of the industry's main headaches.

The decline in subscriptions on the other hand, has been slow and continuous, and stems mainly from a drop in print subscriptions due to the mere fact that "the average age among our print subscribers is 67, it's high, bloody high! They're dying, they're dying away", to use Agneta's words. Her view is shared by Gunnel who says that "every ring of the church bells is the sound of a lost subscriber".

¹³⁶ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. p. 399

¹³⁷ Bryman and Bell. *Business research methods*. 2011. pp 128-138

Digital subscriptions have increased, garnering some additional income. But, as Ingrid puts it, “the local coverage and role we have today, I think it will be difficult to sustain. The reader-business and digital ad-business will not be enough, there will be a need for additional financing in some way.” Even with a large number of digital subscriptions the income is not enough to offset the losses from the shrinking print business.

Given that about 80 percent of their newspapers’ incomes currently stem from print subscriptions, the situation really worries the editors. Furthermore, with high (and increasing) fixed costs for print and distribution, the margins are getting smaller for every subscriber lost. “It is clear the printed newspaper will be difficult to keep alive, it is so bloody expensive to print and distribute when fewer and fewer choose to subscribe”, Dagmar says.

To cope with the economic hardships, alternative revenue streams are considered. A minority of editors believe there might be a possibility to finance the distribution of the printed newspaper by delivering packages. “When we are going to the letter-boxes in the night, we might as well bring other things”, Britta says. Another possible source of income is state press subsidy. Relying too heavily on it however, is not considered a desirable option. Several editors share Britta’s concern that it “might disappear with a political stroke of a pen”. In addition, as Hedvig puts it, “the shape of the press subsidy is not encouraging digital transformation ... Getting too many digital subscribers is counterproductive as it makes you lose press subsidy”.

Facing this economic situation, most editors frame the development as completely outside of their control, whereas some, like Dagmar, think that “one ought to be self-critical, not just look at the surrounding world. How good has one been at adapting and adjusting? And I kind of think it has taken too long. If we had kept track of the developments, some of the changes we have made in the past five years could probably have been made five years earlier”.

4.2 From the Ashes of the Paper

All editors-in-chief largely share a common view of the technological evolution, closely tied to the economic one. In the words of Elin: “We know that somewhere down the road we will get to a point where the costs become larger than the revenues, when the printed newspaper is at a loss ... the job now is to make sure the digital product is so good one won’t miss the printed paper when that day comes”. In short, the printed newspaper will survive for a while more, but the future is undoubtedly digital.

This digital future will also be one “where the reader-business is more or less the only income for newspapers, if we are talking future future”, in the words of Johanna. “That’s what this transformation is all about and the key we are trying to find by building user-friendly systems, analyses of digital user behaviour, all those things”, she says and continues, “but the commercial business, print and digital ads, is nothing for the future, unfortunately”.

In having found that the digital reader-business is the way forward, the editors express a certain relief. “I think it is important that we have realised there is a business model for the digital world”, says Ingrid, where “journalism won’t be financed by ad revenue. Having come to this point and seeing that it is starting to pay off, in my opinion that has been the largest creator of hope and belief for the future”.

Nevertheless, the editors-in-chief view the shift towards a digital product as a race against the clock, where the transformation of work practices and the product must be done before the surplus of the printed product is extinct. This also means that the renewal must be done with constantly shrinking resources. In Elin’s words, “what worries me, is that we won’t get enough time to do the transformation we need. That the costs augment and the revenues shrink too quickly so that the editorial staff must be reduced before we are ready.”

At the same time, “We have also seen conglomerates which have rushed too fast. Mittmedia used to be an example of that”,

Ingrid says, painting the same picture as many others of a conglomerate that failed because “they rushed too fast and left their readers behind”. She further explains that Mittmedia “lost a lot of paying relations because they impaired print so heavily and so fast. They did a lot of good things, but not in step with the readers, and so it didn’t work out.”

The experiences of others are however not only valuable as cautionary cases in the struggle for survival. As Dagmar says, “I hardly see Aftonbladet and Expressen as local competitors anymore, rather Facebook and Netflix. I think, in the industry, we should learn more from each other”. This opinion is shared by Elin who believes that “it is clear these last years that we have become more colleagues than competitors in the industry. We learn from each other, no one has the right answers, refusing to share with the others. Everyone wants to survive.” The cooperation is further enhanced by large scale consolidations which means former competing newspapers are now colleagues. “We’re part of a family”, as Nanna puts it, and expresses a general positive view of conglomerate-life.

To all editors, the future is uncertain and the road forward thorned, but there are different opinions of just how bad it looks. Some are engulfed by the darkness, whereas others think they are seeing a light at the end of the tunnel. If not for the whole industry, at least for themselves. “I am convinced there is a future, and I believe it is bright, we just have to get through this first”, says Cecilia. Frida on the other hand says that “I am no optimist, i think it [the future] is dark, very dark.” Johanna for her part has “no idea if it is going to work, it might not work, but in that case I suppose you’ll just have to be a communicator at a bloody government agency somewhere”. In that case, she says “then we have at least done what we could”.

Whether or not they are going to reach the light, the editors-in-chief all agree, depends on their ability to find new, younger and digital subscribers, as well as to transform their stock of subscribers into digital ones. “In order to survive, our goal ought to be reaching the younger generation. That will really be a challenge”, says Gunnel. Her opinion is shared by

Dagmar who adds that “forward, I think what’s most important is finding digital revenue”.

4.3 Getting Readers to Swipe Right

The transformation from a printed to a digital product is hindered by several factors. Firstly, the editors-in-chief agree with Agneta when she says that “our print readers, they don’t want anything but print ... That, I’d say is the largest challenge.”

Secondly, editors explain how young people consume very little traditional media, or none at all. The reason for this, editors see predominantly in newspapers’ inability to make content that caters to the young. As Nanna puts it, “The biggest challenge is to reach younger target audiences, to be relevant for younger people ... many under 50 don’t think our content is relevant enough for them to regularly read us.”

Thirdly, neither young nor elderly audiences are necessarily willing to pay for digital news. As Olga says: “The biggest challenge is simply to make people adapt and to make them willing to pay for digital journalism”.

The difficulty in getting people to pay for digital news is further exacerbated by the public broadcasting companies SVT and SR. “We’re fighting hard against Public Service”, says Cecilia, “it makes me angry just thinking about it, how much of an audience they’re stealing from us. They’re using our journalism, rewriting it and publishing for free on the internet.” To counter this threat, the papers “have to be first, before SVT – the first one gets the audience”, says Nanna, further explaining that “if you have come to our site to follow what’s happening, you won’t change for SVT later.”

Consumer’s reluctance to pay for digital news however, is considered somewhat of a passing problem. Thanks to Spotify and Netflix, consumers are getting used to paying for qualitative digital products, and editors are starting to see an increased willingness to pay for journalism. Britta explains that “those who tried to charge too early – there were some that tried – they had to close down, because everything on the internet was free.

So it didn't work ... But then it matured ... now you pay for Spotify and Netflix, a movie Friday night, iTunes, or what it may be."

This creates the foundation on which editors now build different strategies to transform their reader-business, turning it from print to digital.

In order to move the senior audience towards a digital subscription, several editors-in-chief stress the importance of the e-paper as a transit product. "It looks exactly like a printed newspaper, and it gives you the packaging I think people are looking for", says Maja.

To attract new and younger digital subscribers, all editors-in-chief agree with Gunnel when she says that "it ought to be relevant news, from where you live", and continues "I want to know how the kids are doing in school, I want to know what crimes have been committed on my street. Why has that thing not been fixed? How is the elderly care here? We got to be super local!"

This differs from how journalism used to be done. Hedvig explains: "before, as a journalist, you didn't think the way you have to think today, that you have to be perceptive to what readers are willing to pay for. Instead you had some municipality reporter, able to write whatever the hell he wanted – one didn't actually know if it was read, one didn't even give a damn if it was read or not."

Over and over again, the editors all emphasise that the way to understand what readers want is through the analysis of data. Nanna explains the work process at her newspaper, similar to those described by other editors: "Every morning gathering we go through yesterday's digital traffic to see which texts were most read and what conclusions might be drawn. Sometimes it's evident, as with large accidents, but sometimes an investigative report gets high traffic. Was it then due to the angle, or the headline, or the time it was published?" In her opinion, which is widely shared, these types of work practices "have led us to produce less content than before, but our texts are more read. In

my opinion, that is higher quality, if by quality you mean that it reaches the recipient [audience].”

The majority of editors agree with Ingrid when she proudly expresses that, “we’re looking at what type of journalism builds a durable relation, what makes the readers believe in us, like us and be willing to pay for us – and we see that there are high expectations on us doing investigative journalism, for us to have that role. The beautiful thing is that if we go back to the founding principles of media, it corresponds perfectly with the mission we see leads to commercial success”. In other words: the data shows that in order to convert readers to loyal subscribers, the newspapers must do qualitative, investigative journalism, not “clickbait”.

4.4 It’s all about the Journalists

When transforming from print to digital, editors-in-chief all agree with Elin when she says that “the big work lies in the fact that we have ... an editorial staff which is used to the printed paper and how to produce it, but not as used to the digital way of thinking.” Karin agrees that having journalists with the right competencies and mindsets is of paramount importance and says that “for the whole industry, competence and who you can employ is decisive. If we are going to attract new target audiences in their 30’s or 20’s, we’ll need many employees that age.”

Newspapers are in need of new competence, but to improve the economic situation, almost all editors-in-chief believe they will need to further rationalize. As Agneta says, “the only way to cut costs now is to diminish the number of employees ... We’ll have to sack people every year, in fact”.

This further complicates the technological transformation. In Karin’s words: “It is difficult to both recruit and to keep competence when you need to cut costs. I’ve got key personnel that are very far down on the LAS-list,¹³⁸ to put it frankly. How

¹³⁸ LAS, *Lagen om Anställningsskydd*, is the Swedish Employee Protection Act which forces employers to lay off the most recently employed first in case of reduction of the workforce.

am I gonna be able to keep them? It is absolutely decisive for me to be able to do that.”

Unfortunately, workforce related problems do not end with dismissing personnel. Who is going to replace them? “We have noticed that it is very difficult to find good journalists”, Agneta explains, and continues, “those that come from the journalist academy [Journalisthögskolan] are of such terribly low quality. Their writing is so bloody bad, their Swedish is so, so bad ... I don’t know if it’s due to the fact that journalism no longer is a career for the future. Ten years ago everyone wanted to be a journalist, the best students wanted to be journalists and it was highly competitive. Now I don’t know if that’s the case anymore.”

Most editors, like Karin, also talk of how “the profession has changed a lot these last years”, creating a need for multicompetence, for journalists competent with text, photo and film alike. In connection, editors often mention the strain this puts on employees, how it can lead to stress, especially for those unable to adapt. Johanna explains that “if you’re totally uninterested in a digital future, or refuse to understand that the whole world is undergoing a digital transformation, I mean if there is zero comprehension of that, then the journey will be too rough. It’s almost torturous for such a person to be in Swedish media”.

4.5 Make Them do the Right Thing

With these constraints, editors-in-chief must train and motivate their workforce to go digital. To align employees with the editor’s goals and visions, all editors-in-chief repeatedly stress the importance of making employees understand their newspaper’s predicaments. Like Lovisa says, “it’s all about making them [the employees] understand the situation and getting them to move forward”. Furthermore, editors find it difficult to communicate the scale and speed of the transition needed to employees. In Agneta’s words: “It takes too much time, we don’t really have the time to explain that ‘Hey, we ought to focus on digital and do print with our left hand’, and get people to commit themselves. Not just sit there and say yes,

but commit and start working that way, actively seeking that type of journalism.”

Although worrisome, the situation is still perceived as having improved. As Lovisa explains, the employees that remain have “chosen to stay, done the changes required of them. So it’s not an enormous difference between the views of the editorial board and the employees”. Furthermore, when employees have understood the situation and the problems the newspaper is facing, they start engaging with these problems and asking “what are we supposed to do about it?”, Nanna says, “and in the meantime you have thought out a clever strategy”.

Editorial meetings and individual coaching are important tools to motivate employees. Nanna explains how she thinks “it is crucial now to be present here to ignite courage and hope in the employees”. Physical presence and personal involvement are seen as vital in communicating the need for digital transformation. Karin tells us how “the whole time I’ve worked as an editor, I’ve tried to be the one that, even if it might be a bit over explicit, emphasises the importance of the digital transformation. That is, trying to lie far ahead in my argumentation, even too far ahead sometimes. But I think that especially as editorial office manager (redaktionschef) or editor-in-chief you ought to represent change, to affirm it fully, very explicitly”. Gunnel agrees and says that her way to inspire the needed change is to “do it yourself, be the front runner. It’s crucial at a small newspaper. I’ve got to learn, right now for example, I’m vicarious web editor”. However, sometimes that is not enough, which leads some, like Hedvig, to “get some good lecturer to come here and do some exercises with us. Then everyone understands what we have to do”.

Inspiring leadership and convincing lecturers are important, but the employees’ own understanding of how and why to change their way of working to attract digital subscribers, is crucial – and this understanding is achieved through data analysis. Nanna explains how it works in practice at her editorial office: “all journalists get a daily automatic mail from Google analytics, which says how many views their articles have had ... Then everyone has to identify what is working or not: is it the subject,

the angle, the headline, or is it something we shouldn't write about because nobody cares?" Editors are aware data analysis may sound a bit harsh, but as Agneta puts it "we're doing this to help the employees get better, not to control them".

In addition to being crucial for the transformation, "the employees are getting motivated by being able to follow reader behaviour through the tools of analysis", Johanna says. This was not the case a few years ago. The new-found motivational force of the digital tools is considered to be a consequence of the move from an ad-based digital business model where reading was free, to one based on digital subscriptions. Instead of being incited to write clickbait articles, journalists are now rewarded by the digital tools when producing qualitative journalism that readers are willing to pay for. Britta tells us that "when we started to charge, ... for the editorial staff it became like an acknowledgement that journalism has a value, people are paying for it, ... it became a driver in and of itself – journalism has a value and we're going to sell it. So I really think it has gone well. And so I've tried to encourage it, that feeling, because ... it is crucial we succeed in selling our journalism".

"Selling our journalism", or changing the way journalists see the role of ad-business and reader-business within the newspaper, is another important part of the transformation. "You need to try and mix the commercial culture with the journalistic one, which hasn't been commercial at all because well, things have worked out anyway", Britta explains and continues, "But it doesn't work any longer if you do not care for the customers, the readers". Agneta similarly explains that "Here we sit together with sales. 15 years ago it was 'gosh, we can't sit with sales, what would that do to our independence?'".

4.6 What's the Point of it All?

But why are they trying to make this transformation? What purpose do newspapers have, worth fighting so hard for to keep alive? According to Frida, "the newspaper has an important task. It contributes to the cohesion of society". Her view is shared by the other editors and Lovisa says that "our purpose is to independently investigate and portray what is happening in

the local community”. They also see themselves as upholders and defenders of liberal democracy. As Maja puts it, the newspaper has an “important role democratically ... it’s the most important role”. Olga agrees and says that she thinks “it is an extremely important part of a democracy, to have someone auditing the power, even in a small or middle-sized town”. Generally, providing credible as well as democratically responsible local coverage to their readers has been at the heart of the matter for all interviewed editors.

Editors think this purpose is being threatened, especially by the downsizing affecting the industry. Editors worry they will not have personnel enough to fulfil their duty. The democratic function of the newspaper is further jeopardized by anti-democratic political forces growing stronger, as well as by social media and its role in spreading fake news. In Hedvig’s words “there are political parties that want something else with the journalistic mission, they don’t think it contributes... that it is important for the functioning of society. I’m thinking about the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna)”.

At the same time, “this whole social media development has made our role more clearly defined, we have become more aware of our role ... When there is so much fake news flying around it has become more important that someone investigates what has really happened”, Ingrid says and continues, “it also has to do with our business model I’d say, that we have changed model from being dependent on ad-revenues to being dependent on subscriptions”. True journalism has become more relevant and important than ever, and therefore credibility is now seen as a valuable asset that needs to be sustained and emphasized. “It is now starting to become clear ... how we are making a difference, and that there are few that can compete with our credibility. The credibility of the trademark”, Britta says.

4.7 Infectious Influences

With the Covid-19 pandemic evolving during the timeframe of our study, the pandemic naturally was touched upon in many of the interviews. In many ways, editors believe, this crisis will

speed up some of the changes that were already taking place in the industry, especially the decline of the ad-business. Several had at the time of the interviews (Feb-Apr) already started to feel the effects. In Lovisas words, “The way it is right now, with Corona and the surge that comes with it, the ad-business is affected immediately”. Karin shares this view and states that, “worst case, we lose a lot of advertisements, and in that case we will have to sack a lot of people ... Best case, it is just a temporary dip which will pass and then get the ad-business going again, and then it is not that bad”. Johanna shares her worries, “Corona will redraw the whole map of media in Sweden, we’ll have a lot more bankruptcies I can say. And newspapers will disappear. Sales personnel will disappear. It’s complete chaos. But I hope it will work out in the end”.

However, the newspapers have also experienced an increase in reader interest, and many editors have seen a net increase in subscriptions over the latest period, Gunnel is one of them: “If it’s something we can see in this wretched crisis we’re living through right now, it is that we have never had as many readers as now, especially digital ones. So people are really longing for information and need to know. It might lead to people adding us as a bookmark, it might be worth something. Every cloud has a silver lining.”

The editors believe the pandemic highlights the value of the local press, as many residents now turn to them for the latest information on local developments and effects of the crisis. Maybe the increased interest in the local will strengthen them in the long run? As Nanna expresses it, “I think the local community will be revalued for many ... Maybe we [the newspaper] will gain another type of value in another type of society”.

5 Analysis

Here follows an analysis of the data structured in line with our simplified model of sensemaking.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ See section 2.2. p. 20

1. *Perception of turbulent contexts:* The overall sense that the industry experiences a slow moving crisis,¹⁴⁰ coupled with the demands created by the digital transformation,¹⁴¹ creates the kind of uncertainty and ambiguity that sets off sensemaking processes.¹⁴² Currently, the Covid-19 pandemic similarly prompts an increase in sensemaking activities.¹⁴³

Another source of ambiguity is identity discrepancies.¹⁴⁴ Firstly, many editors perceive their newspaper's image of being local, credible, and standing for democratic values as being called into question by social media and political forces.¹⁴⁵ Secondly, comparing their current identity with their historical, as well as their necessary future one, they also sense a discrepancy between being rooted in printed news while aiming to become a digital media provider – at present they are somewhere in between, neither just a printed newspaper, nor an all-digital media provider.¹⁴⁶ These discrepancies also trigger a need for sensemaking.

2. *Sensemaking need:* Many editors express the need to make everyone in the organization understand the current situation and the threats in order to make everyone work towards the same goal.¹⁴⁷ The lack of understanding however, is perceived to have been larger a few years back. At present, most employees have either understood the problems and the need for solutions, or largely left the organizations.¹⁴⁸ A sensemaking process thus seems to already have taken place.

The need for a shift in identity is in our opinion also evident. All editors believe their newspaper must become even more of a digital first news provider.¹⁴⁹ To attract readers they need to be local reporters, tightly involved with their community,¹⁵⁰ and emphasise their credibility¹⁵¹ – not so much a novel identity, as

¹⁴⁰ See section 4.1, p. 29

¹⁴¹ See section 4.2, pp. 31-32

¹⁴² See section 2.1.3.1

¹⁴³ See section 4.7, p. 39-40

¹⁴⁴ See section 2.1.3.1

¹⁴⁵ See section 4.6, p. 39

¹⁴⁶ See section 4.2, pp. 31-32

¹⁴⁷ See section 4.5, p. 36

¹⁴⁸ See section 4.5, p. 37

¹⁴⁹ See section 4.2, p. 31

¹⁵⁰ See section 4.3, pp. 33-35

¹⁵¹ See section 4.6, p. 39

returning to a historical identity. The Covid-19 pandemic has further cemented the need for a more local and credible profile, as editors believe the pandemic has shown these are values readers will look for in a world of fast spinning information.¹⁵²

3. *Sensegiving imperative*: Although only one editor clearly explains how employees turn to her for a unified understanding,¹⁵³ many talk about how they need to explain to employees where the newspapers are heading to make them work in the same direction.¹⁵⁴ Something which might indicate that employees demand sensegiving from the editors.
4. *Leader's sensemaking*: Editors make sense of their experiences from the industry and their organizations through a few distinct frames of meaning. A unanimously held frame is that of crisis or decline, stemming from digitalisation causing a drop in advertising and subscription revenues, that threatens the survival of their newspaper,¹⁵⁵ thus creating an understanding that enables actions from them and their employees.¹⁵⁶ The impetus to act is further enhanced by the perceived time limit.¹⁵⁷

The crisis is by most considered to have mostly external origins.¹⁵⁸ By placing the guilt outside the organization, we think internal conflicts are likely avoided and the possibility to make the staff work together enhanced.

However, by understanding the internal inability to provide an attractive product as contributing to the crisis,¹⁵⁹ collective action can be directed towards the preferred solutions. Furthermore, by perceiving democracy as threatened, newspapers become more important than ever,¹⁶⁰ which seems to motivate editors, and maybe also their employees.

In terms of solutions to the threats editors observe, it is striking how all interviewees mention moving towards a

¹⁵² See section 4.7, p. 40

¹⁵³ See section 4.5, p. 37

¹⁵⁴ See section 4.5, pp. 36-38

¹⁵⁵ See section 4.1, pp. 29-30

¹⁵⁶ See section 4.5, pp. 36-38

¹⁵⁷ See section 4.2, p. 31

¹⁵⁸ See section 4.1, p. 30

¹⁵⁹ See section 4.3, p. 33

¹⁶⁰ See section 4.6, p. 39

subscription-based digital product.¹⁶¹ Framing this as the solution provides direction for the actions needed to meet the perceived threats. Within this frame, editors then use more specific methods to take steps towards this solution, such as inspiring a more business-like mindset.¹⁶² Since a successful transformation is understood as earning money through selling a large number of digital subscriptions,¹⁶³ this is a way to enable action towards that end.

A redefinition of identity is considered crucial, both for making journalists willing to change their way of working,¹⁶⁴ and making readers want to buy a different product.¹⁶⁵ Re-identifying as more digital, local, and credible is often understood by editors as partly returning to the true roots of journalism,¹⁶⁶ with the added benefit of also being the solution to many of the obstacles the organization faces.¹⁶⁷ It is therefore in line with the editors' desired organizational change as well as with their values and beliefs.

Based on the overall impression of the interviews, it seems like editors who see the future in a more positive light, frame more of the variables that affect their performance as controllable; they mention good leadership and strategic choices as having a large impact on dealing with the crisis. Those who envision a bleaker future on the contrary seem to see circumstances as uncontrollable; they put larger emphasis on their future being determined by such things as regulations and shifting technology. Those understanding the future as more controllable thus seem to have a view of the situation that both enables action, and makes them envisage a brighter future. The others have reduced uncertainty by understanding their actions as not affecting the outcome very much, but this sensemaking does not enable action.

Another difference in sensemaking frames that we have sensed is a discernible similarity between the narratives and choice of

¹⁶¹ See section 4.2, p. 31

¹⁶² See section 4.5, p. 38

¹⁶³ See section 4.2, p. 32

¹⁶⁴ See section 4.4, pp. 35-36

¹⁶⁵ See section 4.3, pp. 34-35

¹⁶⁶ See section 4.3, pp. 35, 39

¹⁶⁷ See section 4.3, pp. 35, 39

words of editors-in-chief belonging to the same conglomerate. This indicates that editors' sensemaking is partly conducted within these conglomerates.

5. *Sensegiving*: The sensegiving from editors to employees is carried out in several ways, and they all emphasise the need to make the employees understand the threats and solutions.¹⁶⁸

Editors frequently use similar business-like vocabulary to label parts of their organizational reality, like reader-business, ad-business, and package-business.¹⁶⁹ This can be understood as editors seeing a need for more business identity and using these verbal cues to transfer that understanding to employees.

Another form of sensegiving is using pre-meditated and ready-to-use understandings. One editor mentions how she explains problems to employees, waits for them to ask what they are supposed to do about it, and then presents a thought-out strategy.¹⁷⁰ This example shows a very intuitive understanding of the sensemaking process in the employees, first creating uncertainty, and then reducing it by giving sense when members are receptive.

All editors stress the importance of technology for their sensegiving, especially using reader analysis to inspire journalists' own thinking about what work methods are effective.¹⁷¹ Thus igniting sensemaking processes in line with the editors' sensemaking. Technology is also used frequently when communicating with employees, for example by sending regular emails to impart understanding.¹⁷²

Though important, sensegiving through technology is not enough. Many editors describe the need to show commitment by embodying the change through actions and constantly talking about the need to go digital, as well as being present in the organization. By attending meetings and engaging with employees they impart their understanding and vision.¹⁷³ Some

¹⁶⁸ See section 4.5, p. 36

¹⁶⁹ See section 4.1, p. 30

¹⁷⁰ See section 4.5, p. 37

¹⁷¹ See section 4.5, pp. 37-38

¹⁷² See section 4.5, p. 37

¹⁷³ See section 4.5, p. 37

have also hired consultants to teach employees about the changes needed.¹⁷⁴

Another form of sensegiving, is that of structural changes to the organization. Some editors, seeing a need for more business sense among journalists, moved journalists and sales people to the same floor.¹⁷⁵

From the discourse of editors, it is evident how they perceive traditional expectations of journalists as an impediment to journalists' sensemaking.¹⁷⁶ The very rooted expectation of newspaper journalism resulting in a product made of physical paper, is viewed as disruptive to the employees' ability to make sense of the digital transformation.¹⁷⁷ Editors also deal with expectations by communicating the difficult situation of the newspaper,¹⁷⁸ thereby making employees expect drastic change, thus maybe facilitating it.

Recently however, with social media and fake news complicating the information landscape,¹⁷⁹ editors find that traditional expectations of what a newspaper is might help make sense of the way forward. Editors explain how they talk about journalistic merit, such as credibility, critical evaluation of sources, and upholding liberal democratic values, as being more important than ever in a digital landscape.¹⁸⁰ That way, the traditional newspaper media having a natural place in the modern digital media landscape, makes perfect sense.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Answering the Research Question

With the purpose of shedding light on how editors-in-chief of Swedish daily newspapers cope with the turbulent environment

¹⁷⁴ See section 4.5, p. 37

¹⁷⁵ See section 4.5, p. 38

¹⁷⁶ See section 4.4, p. 35

¹⁷⁷ See section 4.4, p. 35

¹⁷⁸ See section 4.5, pp. 36-37

¹⁷⁹ See section 4.6, p. 39

¹⁸⁰ See section 4.6, p. 39

and continuous decline of the newspaper industry, we set out to answer the following research question:

How do editors of contemporary Swedish daily newspapers construct and communicate their reality in terms of threats and solutions in the context of a declining industry?

Our findings show that editors-in-chief largely share a common view of the future, the present situation, and what has brought them there. They see the newspaper industry as struggling for survival by trying to transform from a printed to a digital format, in an environment heavily impacted by the digital transformation. The speed of transformation, the lack of adequate competence, and the difficulty to attract digital customers, are seen as the largest threats to their newspapers. To survive, editors-in-chief believe newspapers must attract new digital subscribers by publishing relevant and local journalism backed-up by data analysis. Editors express relief in seeing a way forward, and view the digital reader-business as a return to journalistic traditions. Digitalisation thus threatens newspapers, while concurrently making their work more important than ever. Editors stress the need to make employees understand the difficult situation, in order to increase the willingness to make the changes needed. Even editors seeing a crisis largely outside of their control, talk extensively of trying to make their employees feel hope and motivation.

Combining the theories of sensemaking during organizational crisis, and sensemaking during organizational change, we created a model for sensemaking in dissolving industries. The model gives a process perspective of how editors construct and communicate threats and solutions: In the turbulent contexts they are facing, editors' understanding is constructed in ways to cope with the uncertainty and ambiguity that surrounds them, and with the implicit, but sometimes explicit, purpose of creating frames of meaning that can enable action when communicated to employees. In many ways editors seem intuitively aware of sensemaking and sensegiving processes, for example when emphasising the importance of public commitment to achieve their desired sensegiving objectives. Maybe this should not be surprising, since the very profession of journalism entails making sense of what you observe, and imparting that sense to others through the journalistic product.

6.2 Discussion and Suggestions for Further Research

In our opinion the strength of this study lies in the fact that it provides a broad picture of the views of editors-in-chief on the development of the industry and which strategies are useful, thereby providing insights that contribute to filling the identified gap of research on the role of editors-in-chief. We thereby hope it may serve as a source of information and inspiration for practitioners and others interested in the development of the newspaper industry.

To a large extent, the findings are in accordance with earlier research. For example, the editors' understanding of the overall situation in the Swedish newspaper industry corresponds to statistics described in this study's background section. As the demand for news is not simply declining, but shifting, the editors describe a need to simultaneously reduce and change the workforce, implying they must make decisions with limited resources and within a restricted time frame. This is similar to the experiences of leaders in other declining industries. In addition, the editors' emphasis on the need for more audience-oriented journalism corresponds with previous studies.

We do, however, find some differences with previous academic understandings of how editors perceive their role, and how they perceive the effects of digitalisation on newspapers. The literature on journalism generally presents editors-in-chief as struggling to uphold two opposing missions, straddling the line between journalistic and business responsibilities. Additionally, digitalisation has often been portrayed as a threat to the journalistic profession. Studies conveying a more positive view of digitalisation and a business mindset are considered exceptions. Our study, however, confirms the latter category. We find, like them, that the business mindset and digitalisation in many ways are considered compatible with, or even to be enhancing the journalistic mission. Our study also, quite uniquely, finds that editors see digital tools as a way to return to

the journalistic tradition. They explain how their reader analysis shows that investigative journalism, not clickbait, is the way forward. This change of focus is also considered a consequence of the recent shift from ad-business to reader-business. It is an interesting development, and merits further academic investigations, especially in regards to whether reporters share this view or not.

With the benefit of hindsight, one can ask if our choice of research methods was fit to answer the question. As previously discussed, we chose to focus our efforts on interviewing a cross-section of editors, given our limitations. With the intersubjective nature of sensemaking processes, including other perspectives than editors', such as employees', could have increased the accuracy of our findings. We did, for example, not get a convincing indication of the existence of a sensegiving imperative by only interviewing editors. Considering the lack of research on editors' perspectives, however, we think a more narrow approach is motivated. In any case, further research into how other organizational members view the situation is warranted to complement the findings of this study.

During our interview period (25/2-1/4), the Covid-19 pandemic developed quickly, from a peripheric threat to a national emergency, heavily impacting the circumstances of newspapers. Considering that editors were interviewed in different stages of this development, their outlooks may vary with the day of the interview. As such, the pandemic affects both the study's credibility and transferability to other points in time. In addition to a radical drop in ad-revenue, the pandemic had at the time of the study also resulted in a general increase in the number of digital subscriptions. As the crisis, and the resulting confinement, makes people more interested in their local community, some editors wondered whether this could be the newspapers' chance to regain their importance.

Our simplified theoretical model of sensemaking and sensegiving in turbulent contexts was constructed for analysing the empirical data. By revising the model in light of our findings, we attained a relatively good fit between theory and data. The model does however have its limitations, and needs

further development. An interesting missing piece in the theoretical framework is the time aspect of sensemaking processes. Due to the nature of the decline of the newspaper industry, where the triggers of sensemaking are present for long stretches of time, it means that the sensemaking processes are prolonged. In our case, sensemaking seems, to a certain extent, already to have taken place. Our theoretical model offers little understanding of how these aspects affect further sensemaking processes, which is also true for previous research on sensemaking processes, creating an interesting future research gap.

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8 Appendices

Appendix 1: Template email one and two

These email templates were used to contact editors. The first one was used at the beginning of the interview period. The second one was used after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, risks of contagion made necessary to interview over phone.

Template one:

“Hej,

Jag heter Matilda Molander och arbetar till vardags som politisk redaktör på Vestmanlands Läns Tidning, VLT. Under våren har jag dock tjänstledigt för att läsa sista terminen av min ekonomutbildning på Handelshögskolan i Stockholm.

Tillsammans med min uppsatspartner Axel Gustavsson skriver jag en kandidatuppsats i management där vi undersöker hur chefredaktörer för svenska dagstidningar ser på utvecklingen i branschen och hur man i ljuset av den ska leda sin egen tidning. Vi skulle vilja intervju dig, och undrar om du har tid och lust att medverka?

Intervjun tar en knapp timme och görs på redaktionen eller där det passar dig. Du är självklart anonym.

Vänligen,
Matilda Molander”

Template two:

“Hej,

Jag heter Matilda Molander och arbetar till vardags som politisk redaktör på Vestmanlands Läns Tidning, VLT. Under våren har jag dock tjänstledigt för att läsa sista terminen av min ekonomutbildning på Handelshögskolan i Stockholm.

Tillsammans med min uppsatspartner Axel Gustavsson skriver jag en kandidatuppsats i management där vi undersöker hur chefredaktörer för svenska dagstidningar ser på utvecklingen i branschen och hur man i ljuset av den ska leda sin egen tidning.

Vi skulle vilja intervjua dig, och undrar om du har tid och lust att medverka?

Intervjun tar en knapp timme och görs på grund av rådande Coronaläge via telefon. Du är självklart anonym.

Vänligen,
Matilda Molander”

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

The following interview guide was used during interviews. The bolded and italicized text describes categories of inquiry. Primary questions are followed by their assorted follow-up question, marked by hyphens.

Interview guide:

Personlig bakgrund

Vill du börja med att berätta om vad din yrkesroll innebär?

- Titel?
- Vilken tidning?
- Vad gör du rent praktiskt?

Berätta lite om din bakgrund och hur du hamnade här?

- Hur länge har du arbetat här?
- Vad fick dig att vilja bli journalist?
- Hur kom det sig att du blev chefredaktör?

Tidningens situation i dag

Hur ser tidningens situation ut idag?

- Ekonomiskt?
- Anställda?
- Allmänna förutsättningar?
- Hur tror du att folk i stan/på bygden ser på er? Vad är er ställning i lokalsamhället?

Hur har er tidning tagit sig till den position är i idag?

- Vad är de viktigaste faktorerna för att tidningen är i det läget den är i dag?

Utmaningar

Vilka utmaningar ser du för tidningen idag?

Vilka är dina största utmaningar som ledare?

- På vilket sätt?
- Vilka konsekvenser får det för ditt sätt att leda organisationen? Dina anställda?

Lösningar

Vilka lösningar ser du på utmaningarna?

Kommunikation

Hur ser de anställda på dessa problem och utmaningar?

- På vilket sätt skiljer det sig från hur du ser på tidningens utmaningar?

Vad påverkar deras uppfattning av tidningens situation?

Hur är stämningen bland de anställda?

Tidningens framtid

Hur ser framtiden ut?

Vad är tidningens uppgift? Har den ändrats?

Mer specifika frågor

Hur gör du för att få de anställda att vilja jobba mot samma mål som du?

Hur påverkar du deras uppfattning av tidningens situation?

- Tänker du t.ex. på hur du kommunicerar och vilka ord du väljer?
 - Använder du något slags symbolik?
-