TABLOID NOUVEAU GENRE
Format change and news content in Quebec City’s Le Soleil

Colette Brin and Geneviève Drolet

Faced with growing competition and dwindling readership, especially among young people, some metropolitan newspapers have switched from a broadsheet to a smaller, easier to handle format. This strategy has been successful at least in the short term, and has been applied recently in Quebec by small-market newspapers owned by the Gesca chain. In April 2006, Le Soleil, the second-largest daily of the group, adopted a compact format and new design, accompanied by new content sections, changes in newsroom staff and management, as well as an elaborate marketing plan. In announcing the change to its readers, an article by the editor-in-chief focused on adapting the newspaper’s content to readers’ lifestyles and interests, as well as developing interactivity. The plan was met with some resistance in the newsroom and among readers. Based on a theoretical model of long-term change in journalism, briefly set out in the article, this study analyzes this case as it compares to the “communication journalism” paradigm. Specifically, it examines how tensions between competing conceptions of journalism are manifest in Le Soleil’s own coverage of the format change.

KEYWORDS communication journalism; format change; journalism history; journalistic meta-discourse; newspapers; tabloidization

Introduction—A Newspaper’s Response to Changing Times: Format Change in Historical Perspective

After more than a century of publication as a broadsheet, the Quebec City daily newspaper Le Soleil changed to a smaller compact format in April 2006. The term “compact” is commonly used in the newspaper industry to designate “a broadsheet-quality newspaper printed in a tabloid format.”1 Because of the negative connotations associated with the term “tabloid”, this somewhat euphemistic term is also suggestive of the difficulty for broadsheets in adopting a more popular guise without giving the impression of reducing content quality.

This article examines the newspaper’s coverage of itself during the months preceding and following the format change. Articles having the “new” Le Soleil as their main focus, or just mentioning it, are considered here as a form of meta-discourse, revealing tensions between old and new, sometimes conflicting, ways of doing journalism, during a period of adjustment to a very visible change.

Our analysis is inspired by a general model of transformation in journalism practice developed by Jean Charron and Jean de Bonville (1996, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d). Only a few key notions which are particularly relevant to our case study will be discussed here.

Following the model, journalism practice since the 18th century can be divided in four periods, each associated with a dominant type or paradigm with its own
characteristics. This complex theory of “paradigm shifts” in journalism offers historical and theoretical perspective to explain recent and apparently disparate changes. It rests on the postulate that over several centuries, there has existed and continues to exist something called journalism, but that sweeping changes at specific junctures have led to the appearance of new sets of rules and practices. Thus, the changing nature of journalism reflects and follows changes in social structure, but also contributes to larger social change by its function of public discourse.

Although conceived in North America and based on the specific experience of journalism in Quebec, the model is designed to be acultural. Indeed, it has been used to analyze changes in journalism practice in Germany and South America (Charron and de Bonville, 1996, p. 52). The model is useful specifically in addressing recent changes also because it is not guided by normative or prescriptive purposes. It is purely analytical, and so does not concern itself to declare whether journalism is, or ever has been, in “decline” or in its golden age (Schudson, 1997). This allows us to avoid taking sides in the classic debate of quality versus popular press (Esser, 1999, p. 293; Franklin, 1997; Ornebring and Jönsson, 2004; Pradiness Stein, 2005, p. 23). Indeed, this debate can be examined, within the explanatory model, as a discursive manifestation of “crisis” within an established paradigm, a period of uncertainty where old and new sets of journalistic rules coexist. The term “crisis” is defined here as a period of intense change and questioning of established practices and norms, and carries no negative connotation. In the present context, the model offers a larger theoretical framework and historical perspective to changes often described as “tabloidization”, “popularization”, and “marketization” (Barnett, 1998; Conboy, 2007; Dahlgren, 1995; Esser, 1999; Fairclough, 1995).

The first paradigm, called “transmission journalism”, dating back to the 18th century, implies a practice apparently existing without journalists; news circulates through the intervention of social actors (Charron and de Bonville, 2004a, p. 142). At the beginning of the 19th century, this type is progressively replaced by “opinion journalism”, due among other reasons to the control of newspapers by institutions, i.e., political parties, labour movements, and the clergy. Newspaper content takes on a strongly expressive form and serves to propagate political or religious viewpoints held by the owner.

Just before World War I, the “information journalism” paradigm emerges notably because of increasing industrialization and intensification of commerce. The newspaper becomes a vehicle for transmitting primarily a new form of report, the news story (nouvelle), designed to be universal and objective. The norm of journalistic objectivity, although not entirely determined by economic imperatives, fits nevertheless with the industrial and commercial development of the press during this period (Charron and de Bonville, 1996, p. 73).

The exacerbation of commercial competition, technological innovation and consumer culture led to a situation of media “hypercompetition”, provoking, around the 1970s, another fundamental shift in journalism practice. The crisis accompanying the emergence of the “communication journalism” paradigm is characterized by the explosion (éclatement) of the notion of journalistic news (information), progressively replaced by the notion of communication, focusing on news as interaction, as mode of contact with the public. Central to the crisis is the critique and erosion of journalistic objectivity, the guiding principle of “information journalism”, as well as of journalistic authority and professional specificity. Citizen journalism and user-generated content, and the hybridization of
journalism and public relations, advertising, or entertainment, are manifestations of this erosion of journalistic authority.

As well, the choice of topics for journalistic coverage, and the manner in which they should be covered, become more and more diverse and largely exceed the conventional conception of news as recent events of general social and political importance (*actualités*). The figure of news user as citizen is replaced by a consumer figure (Charron and de Bonville, 1996, p. 77). Topics traditionally considered part of the private sphere and relegated to specialized sections or media appear in the front pages and headlines, leaving proportionally less space to political news (Sparks and Tulloch, 1999). The context of hypercompetition in the current paradigm also translates, from the public's perspective, into an overwhelming abundance of content and sources to sift through, requiring a different set of skills to "read the news" (Barnett, 1998; Bird, 1992; Pradiness Stein, 2005). Consumption patterns appear more and more volatile, a source of concern particularly for the newspaper industry (Charron and de Bonville, 1996).

This model of successive periods of transformation in journalism practice can be applied to specific studies of change using a series of parameters ranging from the macroscopic to the microscopic, the most general being the social, political-legal and economic-technological contexts. The most specific is the journalistic text itself (see Figure 1). These parameters are to be considered as an interweaving series of factors influencing journalism practice—though not in strictly hierarchical order—which guide the formulation of hypotheses for specific studies by analyzing the relationship between a few distinct parameters.

In this article, we will examine the relationship between change particularly as manifested in *journalistic texts within the newspaper* (parameter 1) and at the level of the *newspaper as organization* (parameter 5). There is obviously some overlap between parameters, and all levels of the schema are involved to some point to this study. The model suggests, however, that empirical research should take journalistic texts as a starting point and work outwards to more general (macroscopic) considerations.

The present study is one of short-term adjustment within a period of long-term change, spanning several decades. Attempted reforms within media organizations, whether successful or not, provide clearly circumscribed case studies of normative conflict, typical of paradigmatic crisis (Brin, 2003). During these periods of professional experimentation, tensions can be high between journalists and managers or, more specifically, between proponents and opponents of the project. What is at stake is rarely the project itself, but rather competing views of journalistic norms as well as conventional sources of organizational conflict (labour relations, rivalries, occasional coalitions, personality conflicts, etc.). In the process, journalists, editors, and managers eventually negotiate a consensus on the proposed reform, somewhat different from the initial project, but nevertheless indicative of evolution fitting into the new paradigm. The format change at *Le Soleil* was particularly visible to the public eye, as well as the internal tensions which permeated journalistic production before and during this period of adjustment.

**From Competition to Hypercompetition**

Competition is a major component of journalism and an important factor of paradigmatic transformation. The technical and economic conditions prevailing since the late 1970s and 1980s have created a context of competition of such intensity that it
approaches the theoretical model of hypercompetition (Charron and de Bonville, 2004c, p. 290). Hypercompetition, a term developed to describe the new economy, is "characterized by intense and rapid competitive moves, in which competitors must move quickly to build [new] advantages and erode the advantages of their rivals" (D'Aveni, 1994, pp. 217–8).³

In this context of exacerbated rivalry, conventional forms of professional and commercial competition become secondary as another competitive aspect emerges: the frantic race for the public's attention. As media consumption habits evolve, news consumption becomes more rapid and segmented. This has become a primary concern for media owners and managers, but is also now shared by journalists whose professional interests have come to converge with those of their employers during this period (Demers, 1989; McManus, 1994). The commercial imperative of retaining the public's attention has become a professional imperative and is now integrated to journalists' discursive
consciousness. For example, the assumption that conventional news media must adopt convergence practices for economic reasons is rarely challenged within the journalistic community. When criticism of commercial strategies is expressed by a journalist, it is usually preceded by a confession of being rather “old school” or “a dinosaur”, thus defining oneself as a journalistic anachronism.

Journalists progressively adjust their practices to that of their competitors and their perception of the public’s expectations. The current technological context of online news and 24-hour television news allows for increased reflexivity in that journalists can more readily and continuously observe their competitors’ work and compare this work to their own, evaluating their performance based on audience expectations and making adjustments as required. In this hypercompetitive context, it becomes crucial to personalize and particularize media messages in order to make one’s voice heard in the cacophony of media sources available. The cycle of production and shelf life of news are also shorter and more fragile than ever.

Charron and de Bonville assert that media firms in the communication paradigm operate simultaneously in five different markets: the advertising market, the consumer market, the source market, the financial market and the professional market. As competition levels increase, so does interdependence between agents in the media system. Solutions adopted by one media firm will tend to be copied, at least in part, by its competitor or competitors. The firm’s position on one specific market will influence choices and strategies used on the other markets. This interdependence of markets translates, within organizations, into contradictory and conflicting imperatives. For example, production of “attractive” content to retain the public’s attention may be contradictory with a journalist’s professional criteria for quality news. These conflicts can only be resolved by constant negotiation and, eventually, compromise.

The recent direct involvement of journalists in commercial competition, as it relates to intensification of competition, leads to new forms of media discourse. Themes and objects of news content are segmented and specialized, a trend that can be perceived as a threat to the universality of journalistic norms (Charron and de Bonville, 2004c, p. 309). However, the mimetic behaviour caused by surveillance of competing media of all forms leads to both homogenization and hybridization. To make their content more intelligible and more visible to the public, journalists borrow from other media genres and from rival sources. The struggle to gain the public’s attention is such that journalists use discursive processes incompatible with the paradigm of “information journalism”, such as humor, dramatization, familiar or colloquial expressions, etc. Hypercompetition requires news to be a spectacle, bringing to the fore processes of enunciation (form and communicative “power” of news) rather than the statements themselves (the “content” of news) (Charron and de Bonville, 2004c, pp. 310–2).

Changing consumption patterns require the media to develop a more dynamic and interactive relationship with the public. Newspaper layout in 2007 is adapted to a browsing or grazing reader, who can scan the page as quickly as a television or computer screen. This search for new strategies and innovation, specific to a context of hypercompetition, is favourable to questioning conventional assumptions and to self-criticism by journalists, raising the level of media and journalistic reflexivity. The media have never been as prompt to discuss their own practices; they are becoming more and more self-referential. This self-criticism indicates in itself the normative crisis, revealing that rules of journalism practice are no longer evident. This process of self-examination
also opens the door to increased criticism from the public. Progressively, the weight of norms defining journalism as a distinct form of public discourse diminishes in favour of norms and dispositions focusing on the relationship between a medium and its public (Charron and de Bonville, 2004c, p. 315). Journalistic discourse, in its semantic and morphological aspects, is progressively characterized by the struggle for the public’s attention and advertising revenue. The tabloid front page, with its glaring headlines and high-contrast visuals, although it existed prior to the communication paradigm, can be considered as somewhat of a general reference point or model, in the sense that broadsheets now need to use more aggressive visual and rhetorical strategies to call attention to themselves.

The Quebec Newspaper System

Concentration of media ownership first raised concerns in Quebec in 1967, when Paul Desmarais added the Montreal daily newspaper La Presse to the Power Corporation conglomerate. Since then, government task forces, committees and commissions, both at the federal and provincial levels, have suggested limits or controls with varying levels of success. Ownership in broadcasting, cross-ownership and foreign ownership remain regulated in Canada, although there is continuing and intensifying debate about these measures in the present context of globalization, convergence and abundance of media sources.

The media in Quebec has developed somewhat independently from the Canadian system, insulated by a language barrier, public policy, and other historical and cultural factors relating to the classic “two solitudes” metaphor. For example, the term “national media” is commonly used to designate a broadcast network or newspaper distributed exclusively in the province of Quebec, which also points to unresolved constitutional issues.

However, the small size of the market and restrictions on foreign ownership translate into a very limited group of owners controlling the Quebec media. Since 2000, several major transactions have notably served to create new chains, consolidate existing groups, and develop convergence strategies. They have also fuelled concerns regarding the future of local news in smaller markets.

Daily print newspapers show among the highest, if not the highest level of media concentration in Quebec. As shown in Table 1, multimedia empire Quebecor’s two tabloids, Journal de Montréal and Journal de Québec, account for nearly half of French-language newspaper circulation in the province. Both dominate their local markets. The Gesca chain (Power Corporation), which includes the Montreal daily La Presse, Le Soleil and five regional newspapers, controls just over half of the same market, leaving just 3 per cent for the independent “quality” newspaper, Le Devoir.

A distinctive trait of the Quebec media, as of Quebec society as a whole, is the significant role played by labour unions. About 40 per cent of the workforce is unionized, and labour federations (centrales syndicales) play a key role in Quebec politics. A sizable majority of full-time working journalists in the major media belong to a union (Pritchard and Sauvageau, 1999), although the industry is evolving toward a higher proportion of freelancers and short-term contracts. Through negotiation of collective agreements in individual media outlets, over several decades, unions have contributed significantly to the professionalization of journalism in Quebec (Demers and Le Cam, 2006). They also provide
substantial financial support to the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (FPJQ), a voluntary association of about 2000 members.9

**Le Soleil: 20 Years of Turbulence**

The 2006 format change follows 20 years of organizational turbulence at *Le Soleil*, including two controversial ownership changes, management and newsroom restructuring, layoffs, a journalists’ strike and ongoing labour tensions, as well as technological changes. The newspaper’s offices were also moved twice during this period.

The Hollinger era (1987–2000) saw investment in a new press and technological infrastructure but also labour strife and political controversy, perhaps due in part to Conrad Black’s unique personality. Undoubtedly a passionate newspaperman with a strong attachment to his home province, he is also known for his fierce attacks on journalists, unions, and separatists.

Under Black’s leadership, *Le Soleil* was to become “the *Washington Post* of Quebec”. Some critics have observed that this promise was never quite realized (Lesage, 1997). During a journalists’ strike which lasted two months in 1992–3, the union’s president raised the spectre of tabloidization: “Space reserved for real news [in *Le Soleil*] has rapidly diminished in favour of soft news. In-depth analysis has disappeared, while fashion, pet care, gossip and ‘trendy’ columns have proliferated” (Pelchat, 1992).10 In 1994, 20 journalists and 75 other employees of the newspaper were laid off. Hollinger sold *Le Soleil* to Quebecor in 2000.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups and titles</th>
<th>Total copies</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>French only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gesca (Power)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La Presse</em></td>
<td>1,485,088</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La Tribune</em></td>
<td>195,908</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La Voix de l’Est</em></td>
<td>95,395</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le Nouvelliste</em></td>
<td>258,774</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le Soleil</em></td>
<td>583,855</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le Quotidien</em></td>
<td>164,997</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le Droit</em></td>
<td>216,970</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,000,987</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebecor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le Journal de Montréal</em></td>
<td>1,925,384</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le Journal de Québec</em></td>
<td>714,836</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,640,220</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CanWest Global</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Gazette</em></td>
<td>984,358</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Le Devoir</em></td>
<td>177,816</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24,460</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 titles</td>
<td>6,827,841</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Centre d’études sur les médias (2008).
Soleil's downtown building and the newsroom and offices moved to rented space in a quieter, more residential area. Some speculated this move was actually devised to leverage capital for Black's expensive pet project, the National Post (Lemieux, 2006).

In 2001, Hollinger sold Le Soleil, Le Droit and Le Quotidien and 15 weekly newspapers to Gesca. Power Corporation's previous attempts to buy Le Soleil in 1973 and 1987 had been blocked by Quebec premier Robert Bourassa. This time, the provincial government did not intervene directly, but rather appointed a special commission on ownership concentration. The commission's report (Commission permanente de la culture, 2001) recommended the creation of an ownership surveillance mechanism. This was further specified in a subsequent report authored by a group of experts, led by former journalist and media scholar Armande Saint-Jean (Saint-Jean and Saint-Jean 2003). The recommendation was not implemented by the provincial government.

During the commission's hearings, Le Soleil's journalists' union expressed concerns over anticipated content-sharing and “montrealization” of the newspaper (Leduc, 2001). The new publisher, Alain Dubuc, freshly arrived from Montreal, assured that Le Soleil would keep its local identity, although some “less important” regional news could be sacrificed (Dubuc, 2001). Le Soleil, he insisted, would remain a “national” newspaper, featuring political journalism and international reporting, enlightened commentary, and lofty editorials. Finally, the conclusion of the transaction was received with some relief by the journalists' unions, in part out of hope that their fortunes would improve under Québécois ownership, compared to the Hollinger era (Cauchon, 2000).

However, the tensions soon resurfaced. In 2004, Alain Dubuc, who had by then resigned as publisher of Le Soleil, was immediately hired as a freelance columnist for all seven Gesca newspapers (Giguère, 2004). The journalists' union denounced this as an affront to the diversity of opinion and to the autonomy of local newsrooms (Cauchon, 2004a). Among other measures of protest, reporters refused to add bylines to their articles on the days when Dubuc's column was published (Cauchon, 2004b).

During these 20 years of turbulence, Le Soleil has seen its circulation dwindle, then stagnate (see Figure 2), while its competitor, conventional tabloid Journal de Québec (Québecor), founded in 1967, has consolidated its lead since the mid-1990s. Le Soleil reached its peak average weekday circulation of 150,000 copies in 1965 and has been declining since the 1970s (Centre d'études sur les médias, unpublished data).

Efforts to rejuvenate content—and the newspaper's aging readership—including redesigned and expanded consumer sections, a tabloid sports section, free distribution on the university campus, a free monthly magazine distributed on city buses, and hiring younger journalists, have not succeeded in reversing the trend. It is possible, however, that these efforts have slowed the decline in readership.

A recent study of news content in three local dailies, including Le Soleil, between 1992 and 2007 suggests that although the news hole has shrunk with the format change, the proportion of local news has remained the same (Centre d'études sur les médias, 2007). The study found that in Le Soleil, the proportion of articles dealing with conventional political, social and economic affairs (“heavy” news) has diminished in favour of “lighter” content (sports, entertainment, crime, consumer news).

This apparent move toward a more popular form of journalism, aside from economic considerations, occurred in a period of labour tensions and affirmation of parochial sentiment. The recent popularity of local talk radio, exploiting the resentment of the capital toward Montreal, among other populist themes, and the rise of the political right in
both federal and provincial elections have been associated to what has been called, somewhat simplistically, the Quebec City “mystery” or “enigma” (Robitaille, 2006).

The Format Change Strategy

Over a period of six months, Gesca’s regional broadsheets all changed to a smaller format: *Le Nouvelliste* in October 2005, *La Tribune* in January 2006, *La Voix de l’Est* in February 2006, and *Le Soleil* in April 2006. As far as we know, there are no official plans for a format change at the Montreal flagship, *La Presse*, although its layout was redesigned in 2003.

This change was motivated by the popularity of the tabloid format among readers, but also, presumably, the rising cost of newsprint. *Le Soleil’s* foreign models for “quality” compacts included British newspapers like *The Guardian*, but also *Zero Hora* in Brazil. The launch of the new format and design was also timed to coincide with the newspaper’s 110th anniversary. The journalists’ collective agreement was signed a few days before the new format’s first edition (Cauchon, 2006a).

In terms of content, the new *Le Soleil* features new columns on provincial politics and municipal affairs, but also child-rearing advice (from “Dr Nadia”, a psychologist and host of a popular reality show), and an expanded Arts and Entertainment section with a locally-written gossip column on Hollywood celebrities. The revamped design includes a new logo and detachable middle sections colour-coded by topic area (“arts and life” daily, “travel” and “home” on Saturdays). There are no more articles on the front page, only headlines and photos as on conventional tabloids (Figure 3).

To sell the change to its readers, and perhaps more importantly, to attract new ones, especially among young people, *Le Soleil* launched a massive advertising campaign featuring elements of the new design and focusing on the “compact” theme, associating

---

**FIGURE 2**

the revamped newspaper with trendy consumer items. Subscribers could win a Smart car, an iPod, or all their living expenses paid for a year. Readers were invited to submit entries to a recipe contest and to buy encyclopaedia volumes through the newspaper. There were also several articles, mostly celebrating the new look, but also some “straight” news coverage.

A few months after the change, the change seemed to have had little impact on circulation—a 1 per cent rise on weekdays, 2.9 per cent on Sundays—while *Le Journal de Québec*’s circulation rose by 6.6 and 4.8 per cent for its weekday and weekend editions, respectively (Cauchon, 2006b). Reactions were mixed: many new readers were pleased with the smaller size, but some long-time subscribers had complaints, notably that sports and business news were not removable sections.

**Journalistic Meta-discourse**

In the months before and after the format change, *Le Soleil*’s publisher, managing editor, columnists and reporters wrote articles on the theme of the “new” paper. Newsroom supervisors, such as managing editor Yves Bellefleur (2006), particularly insist on the newness of the paper rather than just the format change. In total, we found 19 articles mainly about the new format and 10 with passing mentions, all published between September 2005 and June 2007. In these articles, the medium is its own discursive object, and the way in which the story is reported closely compares to the paradigm of communication journalism. These texts inform us on the discursive and semantic characteristics of journalism production in a period of change, but also on the reflexive consciousness and self-justification within the news organization, as it is shared with its public through the newspaper. The journalistic texts appear as a meta-discourse on journalism practice and newspaper management. Not only do they announce change, they contribute to justify it and invite readers to comment and react to it.

Journalistic meta-discourse is used here as an umbrella concept, covering meta-journalism, which has been defined as “journalism about journalism”, specifically in the context of emerging online practices (Deuze, 2003, p. 210), and “meta-coverage”, described as “the increased fascination of media actors with news management as a news topic” (Esser and Spanier, 2005, p. 29). In the case of *Le Soleil*’s format change and 110th anniversary, journalistic meta-discourse takes on the form of self-celebration and commemoration. To this effect, Tulloch (2007, p. 43) notes that “Like nations, newspapers celebrate key anniversaries and rites of passage. They lend themselves to systematic personification, and aspire to have voices, personalities, character, identities”. Although it is not entirely new for newspapers to discuss their own doings, especially at the launch of a new publication or other event it considers newsworthy, this practice appears to be more frequent and perhaps more systematic in the current paradigm.

In true communication journalism form, the motivation behind the format change is clearly stated in the articles as a willingness to “adapt to readers’ lifestyles” (Bellefleur, 2006, p. 4). It is also described as a necessary adaptation to general social change (N. Provencher, 2006, p. 7). Terms such as “pleasing”, “easy to read” and “simple” are used to assure the reader of immediate gratification when consuming the new product. The insistence on the format’s practicality points to the fact that reading a newspaper is no longer assumed to be part of a daily routine, but rather that it competes with other media-
related activities (Charron and de Bonville, 1996, p. 77). Le Soleil is no longer competing only with Le Journal de Québec and other newspapers distributed locally, but also with “new media created . . . to inform and entertain” (A. Provencher, 2006b, p. 32).

Consistent with the hypercompetition thesis, there is an implicit commitment to responsiveness to complaints and willingness to adjust the newspaper to readers’ preferences following the launch of the new format. Thus, Le Soleil is described as being on “constant watch” (A. Provencher, 2006b, p. 32), always ready to show “audacity and innovation” (A. Provencher, 2006a, p. A1) to conquer its readership. In a context of source abundance, acceleration of news consumption and reader volatility, media firms find themselves in a state of almost permanent change (Picard, 2005). This state of change is accompanied by a no less constant state of interactivity with the public, a situation unique to the current paradigm (Charron and de Bonville, 2004a, p. 195). The media firm tries to establish a relation of complicity with the reader, by announcing its wish to “develop the concepts of user-friendliness and clarity . . . by continually adjusting and by being attentive to readers’ observations” (Tanguay, 2007, p. 4).

This desire to be clear, an easy read, and especially in touch with the public’s needs impels journalists to initiate a “conversation” with the public. This calls into question the conventional rule of objectivity and draws journalism practice toward other forms of public communication (Charron and de Bonville, 2004a, p. 163). This appears quite clearly in columnists’ texts: “so, how d’ya like the new paper?”15 (N. Provencher, 2006, p. 7). The
columnist speaks directly to the reader, in colloquial form typically used in casual conversation, implying familiarity, informality: “once you get used to it, bunch of rascals, you won’t be able to live without it” (N. Provencher, 2006a, p. 7). This form of address, mimicking interpersonal exchange between close acquaintances, appears somewhat removed from the public sphere model traditionally associated with journalistic discourse (Charron and de Bonville, 1996, p. 78).

Journalistic meta-discourse also reveals tensions and contradictions specific to a context of change and hypercompetition (Hamilton, 2005). Even though managing editor Yves Bellefleur insists on substantial improvements in content, he also maintains the importance of “historic continuity at Le Soleil. None of the quality, the rigor, the distinction and the diversity which are our trademark have been sacrificed” (Bellefleur, 2006, p. 4). Publisher André Provencher also notes this double requirement of being both innovative and respectful of tradition (2006a, p. A1). The adoption of a smaller format, and even the term “compact” itself, implies a debate regarding what constitutes “good” and “bad” journalism, revealing tensions between constancy and change (Langer, 1998, p. 144).

Articles briefly mentioning the format change, especially columns and features, are also interesting in that they show appropriation of the new format by journalists, as well as inherent tensions within the newsroom and among readers. The format is used as a metaphor for the passing of time and resistance to change, particularly by older people, which also happen to be the newspaper’s most faithful readers. Although such mentions are relatively rare, they also seem to evolve toward a gradual acceptance by journalists.

A retired journalist, profiled in a weekly feature honouring a worthy citizen, admits she is “distressed” by the change but that “things change and you have to keep up with the times” (Méthée Myrand, 2006, p. 16). A Quebec City-based biologist is apparently surprised to discover the new look of the newspaper on her return from an expedition in Antarctica. In the context of the news story, the anecdote serves to illustrate the shock of returning home after spending months in such a foreign environment, her experience compared to that of an astronaut in space (Drolet, 2006, p. 9).

In his 300th bird-watching column, a journalist draws parallels between commemorating this “anniversary” and the format change. In this case, the passage of time is cause for celebration: “what gives me the greatest satisfaction is interactivity with readers” (Samson, 2006, p. M21). A year after the format change, to describe well-off retired professionals living in a residential complex, a columnist imagines them as “nostalgic for Le Soleil’s stock-market pages back when it was still a broadsheet” (Bourque, 2007, p. 6).

Conclusion

Although situated in a specific local and national context, the case of Le Soleil’s format change undoubtedly echoes similar experiences elsewhere in the world. By analyzing a short-term case study within a larger historical model of changes in journalism, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the forces behind these changes in order to see more clearly into the future of newspapers.

The analysis of journalistic meta-discourse shows an interesting paradox of hypercompetition which would require further study. The collective identity of the newspaper appears to be negotiated through the official voice of management (publisher and managing editor), but also the individual, more expressive voices of columnists and
feature writers, whose personal style is especially valued in communication journalism. In this sense, *Le Soleil’s* coverage of its own format change is more than simple self-promotion; despite a clear positive bias, traces of reflexivity and of negotiation of the newspaper’s collective identity appear in the texts.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors wish to thank Daniel Giroux, Jean Charron, Jean de Bonville, Ulric Deschênes, and Philippe Marcotte for their assistance and helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

**NOTES**

2. This key concept for the present study is defined in the next section of the article.
3. For a cogent analysis of the concept’s application to news media production, see Hollifield (2006).
4. This notion, borrowed from Giddens (1984), designates the ability of social agents to verbalize the reasons for their actions, as opposed to “practical consciousness”, i.e., knowing how to act in social situations.
5. Charron and de Bonville define the newspaper system as a population of newspapers and journalists circumscribed in time and space (2004d, p. 224), characterized by relationships of interdependence and competition between agents within the system’s boundaries. For the purposes of the present study, in the current context of convergence, we have opted for a more extensive term including broadcast as well as print media.
7. The Montreal metropolitan area is the only large urban market in Quebec, with six dailies and the headquarters of all national French-language media groups. The population of Montreal area (3.6 million) is about half the population of the province of Quebec (7.6 million), while Quebec City has a population of about 540,000 (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2008).
8. These figures do not include two free dailies distributed in Montreal, *Metro Montréal* (owned by Transcontinental, 60 per cent; Metro International, 25 per cent; Gesca, 15 per cent) and *24 heures* (Quebecor), as circulation numbers do not represent readership in the same proportions (Centre d’études sur les médias, 2008).
10. All quotes from *Le Soleil* have been translated by the authors of this article.
11. This editorial was written two weeks after the attacks of September 11, 2001, which may explain in part the insistence on international news. Still, Dubuc explains the changes were made during the summer months of 2001.
12. *Le Soleil’s* circulation appears to have benefited, perhaps temporarily, from a labour conflict at *Le Journal de Québec* from April 2007 to August 2008. During this period, locked-out journalists also published their own free daily, *MédiaMatinQuébec*, with funding from various labour organizations.
13. *Le Quotidien* and *Le Droit* were already tabloids before the transaction.
14. A slight reduction of the broadsheet format design was done for this reason a decade earlier (Corbeil, 1996).

15. “[P]is, vous le trouvez comment votre nouveau Soleil?”

16. “[E]t une fois l’habitude prise, ma bande de snoros, vous allez être les premiers à ne plus pouvoir vous en passer, vous m’en donnerez des nouvelles.”

REFERENCES


Colette Brin (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Département d’information et de communication, Université Laval, Pavillon Louis-Jacques-Casault, salle 5604, Québec, Canada G1K 7P4. E-mail: colette.brin@com.ulaval.ca

Geneviève Drolet, Département d’information et de communication, Université Laval, Pavillon Louis-Jacques-Casault, salle 5604, Québec, Canada G1K 7P4. E-mail: genevieve.drolet1@ulaval.ca