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“Either We’re Saved, or We’re Doomed”: Exploring Identity Shifts and Memorialization in BuzzFeed News’ Oral History

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ABSTRACT

In 2023, BuzzFeed announced the closure of its Pulitzer-winning news division. This study explores identity shifts and memorialization within BuzzFeed News through its 2023 oral history, documenting its rise, decline, and eventual organizational death. Through a discourse analysis of narratives from 57 employees, this research identifies three distinct phases of organizational identity evolution driven by ideological, practical, and emotional discourse. This study broadens our understanding of identity work within news organizations by illustrating how journalistic identities adapt, persist, and are memorialized amid organizational precarity and closure. This study also contributes to organizational identity literature by showing how collective identity is constructed, adapts over time, and ultimately becomes memorialized at the point of organizational death, even when no future exists for the institution.

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On 20 April 2023, BuzzFeed announced the closure of its Pulitzer-winning news division, launched in 2012, combining viral content with traditional journalism under the leadership of Ben Smith, a former Politico reporter (Garber 2011; Mullin and Robertson 2023). Despite its innovative approach, studies showed BuzzFeed News often aligned with traditional journalistic values (Canter 2018; Stringer 2018; Tandoc 2018; Tandoc and Foo 2018). On 5 May 2023, reporters and editors at BuzzFeed News published an oral history of the organization, ensuring that the “final word” on the organization would “come from the people who worked here” (Notopoulos and Hall 2023). Reporters memorialized what they had experienced in their time at the organization, from the extravagance BuzzFeed was able to afford to the journalistic triumphs they felt had significantly impacted the industry.

Because of the personal nature of the oral history and the collective reflection on what made the organization impactful to its journalists, we contend that the text carries significance to the journalistic identity BuzzFeed reporters developed and tied to the organization. A clear pattern of identity evolution and memorialization emerges in recollecting the triumphs and challenges they faced. While scholars have studied how aligning organizational identity and strategy is essential for organizational survival (Anthony and Tripsas 2016; Bövers and Hoon 2021), there is a lack of research on organizational identity

communication during organizational death when there is no future for the organization. Within journalism research, the effects of the industry's precarity and widespread closures have primarily been studied from the perspective of smaller news organizations or those owned by large conglomerates. Focusing on BuzzFeed News provides an opportunity to look at a major organization outside of these two categories and broaden the scope of academic research related to identity shifts within journalistic organizations. Therefore, this study aims to trace and understand the identity shifts of BuzzFeed's News and their journalists over the course of their organizational lifespan, leading to the identity memorialization communicated at their organizational death.

Literature Review

Newsroom Closures as Organizational Death

The precarity of journalism organizations in the U.S. has intensified over the past 15 years, with widespread newsroom closures—primarily in local news—prompting growing concern across the media landscape (Abernathy 2018; Abernathy and Stonbely 2024; Ferrucci and Alaimo 2020; Jenkins et al. 2020; Mathews 2022; Sridharan and Bosse 2024). The closure of BuzzFeed News marked the start of significant downsizing of large-scale mainstream media organizations, showcasing an increasing precarity beyond local news ecosystems. For instance, The Los Angeles Times cut over 10% of its staff in mid-2023 and another 20% in early 2024 (Robertson 2023; Tobitt 2024). Vice Media, once valued at \$6 billion, ceased publications and filed for bankruptcy in early 2024 (Maher 2024).

Organizational scholars have long studied this dynamic as organizational death (Bell and Taylor 2011; Blau 2006, 2007; Crosina and Pratt 2019; Harris and Sutton 1986; Hazen 2008; Marks and Mirvis 2001; Spaulding 2015; Sutton 1983, 1987; Zell 2003). Organizational death, discontinuity, and decline are more prescient in financial crises and have material, social, and psychological effects on the various organizational stakeholders (Bell, Tienari, and Hansson 2014). This study situates newsroom closures within this stream of literature and defines organizational death as a situation whereby an organization must terminate its operations because it can no longer continue as a distinct legal entity (Singh, House, and Tucker 1986). In most cases, organizational death is considered an "identity threat" that "induces(s) members to reevaluate aspects of their organizational identity" (Ravasi and Schultz 2006, 433). Scholars have found that during narrations of organizational death, members draw on organizational legacies to create a "legacy organizational identity" that communicates "who we were as an organization" (Gerstrøm 2015; Walsh and Glynn 2008, 262). While previous research has explored the enduring nature of organizational identity during closures, there is a lack of emphasis on the fluidity of identity during the life cycle of an organization, leading to its demise.

Within journalism studies, a growing body of research has analyzed how journalists use "goodbye narratives" in moments of organizational death as both cultural loss and professional affirmation (Gilewicz 2015; Spaulding 2016; Sridharan and Bosse 2024; Usher 2010). These narratives often draw on collective memory to reassert journalism's civic value, emphasizing legacy over commercial failure. Across these studies, journalists reaffirm professional norms, resist existential crisis framings, and construct symbolic continuity through nostalgia and mythmaking. Building on this body of work, this study shifts

the focus toward how such narratives perform organizational identity work at the point of organizational death.

Organizational Identity Change

Organizational Identity (OI) serves as the foundational element answering the pivotal question, “who are we as an organization?” for both internal and external stakeholders (Clark et al. 2010). It instills a unified sense of purpose, aligning members under a shared organizational vision (Boehm et al. 2015; Scott and Lane 2000). Rooted in the defining work of Albert and Whetten (1985), OI is characterized by the organization’s central, distinctive, and enduring traits. It is shaped experientially, through shared cognitive and emotional understandings among members (Bouchikhi et al. 1998; Corley et al. 2006; Jenkins 2014). From a social constructionist perspective, organizational identity is a self-referential concept that stems from collective experiences and shared perceptions of organizational members (Bouchikhi et al. 1998; Corley et al. 2006; Gioia, Schultz and Corley 2000), that allows for multiple identities and their evolution over time (Corley and Gioia 2004; Pratt and Corley 2007).

Schultz (2016) outlines three perspectives on organizational identity (OI) change, viewing identity as (1) enduring stability, (2) periodic change, and (3) ongoing change, linking past and present to a future identity. This enduring view suggests OI remains relatively constant, providing continuity and psychological stability (Albert and Whetten 1985; Erikson 1968; Gioia et al. 2013). OI shifts are often reflected in organizational narratives and discourse, where identity is repeatedly (re)constructed to communicate roles across contexts and timeframes (Albert and Whetten 1985; Gilpin 2008; Patvardhan, Gioia, and Hamilton 2015). Hund and Benford (2004, 245) highlight discourse in identity work, noting that “collective identities are talked into existence.” Existing research defines identity evolution as a sensemaking process that unfolds in response to external threats or organizational change, such as mergers, where members navigate shifting meanings through stages of identity reconstruction or adopt transitional identities that enable continuity while accommodating ambiguity (Clark et al. 2010; Ravasi and Schultz 2006).

Recently, organizational identity studies have utilized the notion of “rhetorical history” to emphasize how organizations selectively interpret their past specifically to “valorize the corporation and advance its purposes,” legitimize its current strategies and maintain the appearance of stability and continuity in the face of change (Suddaby, Foster, and Trank 2010, 161). Several scholars have found that organizations tend to accentuate certain successes from the past, while forgetting critical phases that reflect on their dark or turbulent history (Maclean et al. 2018; Schultz and Hernes 2013; Stigliani and Ravasi 2007). In recent years, “temporality”—understood as the “ongoing relationship between past, present, and future” (Schultz and Hernes 2013, 1)—has emerged as an important yet understudied aspect of organizational identity (Schultz 2016; Schultz and Hernes 2020). Scholars such as Suddaby, Schultz, and Israelsen (2020) argue that *autobiographical memory* is a primary mechanism for understanding the temporal aspects of identity. Organizational autobiographical memory is defined as “the process of enacting a distinct identity of the organization as a coherent actor in time by selective integrating episodes from the past, in the present and for the future into an overarching life narrative of the firm” (Suddaby, Schultz, and Israelsen 2020, 381). Therefore, this study utilizes the rhetorical history of BuzzFeed

News, presented in the form of an autobiographical oral history, to better understand how the making of identity in an organization unfolds over time, leading up to the identity memorialization.

Metajournalistic Discourse

Metajournalistic discourse is a critical framework for journalists and the public to reflect on and shape societal and cultural perceptions of journalism. As a “socially embedded, institutionalized cultural practice,” it facilitates the creation of “shared understandings of journalism [that] arise through discursive processes ... manifested in practice” (Carlson 2016, 361), shaping collective interpretations of its role and identity. This framework examines the profession’s self-image to “better conceptualize how the journalistic community constructs its work and its image concerning the changing conditions in which it operates” (269). Carlson highlights “how utterances about journalism shape news practices and the meanings attached to those practices,” identifying three overlapping processes: “establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy” (350). The actors define who and what is counted as journalists and journalism, setting boundaries for acceptable practices to legitimize journalistic authority.

At its core, metajournalistic discourse serves as a platform for evaluating and critiquing journalism, examining everything from news content to the processes behind its creation and public reception (Carlson 2016). This discourse extends beyond media criticism to encompass discussions on journalists’ roles, responsibilities, and the profession’s critical contribution to democracy, particularly highlighted by recent challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent impact on news outlets (Finneman and Thomas 2022). Drawing on previous metajournalistic discourse research (Carlson and Usher 2016; Ferrucci 2022; Perreault and Vos 2020), this study understands journalists as the “primary definers of journalism,” who are part of an interpretive community that discursively articulate, negotiate and maintains the values, norms and professional identity of journalism (Carlson 2016, 355; Zelizer 1993). The oral history published by BuzzFeed News, while editorialized with a perceived and potentially biased retelling of history, still provides a glimpse into what the journalists at the organization see as inside and outside normative practice. Through the implicit and explicit discourse about the practice, finance, and sustainability of the organization, this study seeks to understand how collective identity is reconfigured across the organizational life cycle and ultimately memorialized during closure within this oral historical narrative of BuzzFeed News.

Method

This study uses discourse analysis to explore how journalists at BuzzFeed communicated their organizational identity through their oral history. Abrams (2016, 1) defined traditional oral history as “the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analysing their memories of the past,” often co-authored by the interviewers and interviewees (Frisch 1990). Oral histories may also be archival, using data collected by others not affiliated with the research, and serve as valuable organizational studies resources (Decker, Hassard, and Rowlinson 2021) In this case, the oral history of BuzzFeed News is considered a textual archive or memoir of the organization

(Courtney and Thompson 1996), narrated through the autobiographical memory collectively constructed by the organizational members (Suddaby, Schultz, and Israelsen 2020). We treat the oral history text produced by the editors and reporters of BuzzFeed News as an archival resource to “capture the construction, expression, dispute, and negotiation of organizational identities” (Ravasi and Canato 2013, 195).

Buzzfeed News published its final piece, a comprehensive oral history, on 5 May 2023. This 10,528-word text, with narratives from 57 employees (including 31 former staff) across diverse roles and international bureaus, captures employees’ perspectives through 26 photos and a note from editor Katie Notopolous, who initiated the project. The editor’s note frames the oral history as a personal, reflective account highlighting BuzzFeed News’ legacy, challenges, and achievements while explicitly avoiding a “business analysis” of the organization’s closure. Additionally, it addresses the critical choice of opting to forego a thorough economic analysis of the organization’s closure, making this oral history a collection of personal perspectives on what had made working at BuzzFeed News both “extraordinary and exasperating.” The note also acknowledges editorial adjustments for clarity and length, a limitation as these choices shaped the archive. The oral history is divided into sections that follow BuzzFeed News’ journey from inception to closure, with journalists’ reflections interwoven throughout to narrate the organization’s story.

To understand the temporal continuity and fluidity of identity, Giovannoni and Ruggero (2023) highlight the importance of analyzing historical texts for recurring themes and identity labels and then mapping key events to show how these labels are enacted, revealing their evolving meanings and related conflicts. This study uses discourse analysis on text produced by BuzzFeed journalists, intended for both industry and public audiences, to examine the construction of meaning through language (Vos and Craft 2017, 1509). As an inductive approach, the authors began with a thorough “preliminary soak” (Hall 1976, 15), reading the oral history multiple times to familiarize themselves with its temporal context, followed by open coding and a constant comparative approach to identify preliminary themes, further refined into discursive strategies using axial coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As the text spans various time periods, themes were based on identity construction communicated through ideological, practical, and emotional lenses. The following findings showcase these themes across three temporal phases in BuzzFeed’s history, illustrating shifts in organizational identity from inception to closure.

Findings

Identity at Inception: Ideological-driven

The earliest memories reporters shared within the collective oral history painted BuzzFeed as a land of plenty in an otherwise dire industry struggling to maintain its footing. Abundant funding and a tech-startup mentality that emphasized creativity and challenging commonplace perspectives in the industry influenced the idealized journalistic practices and outlook within the memory of the interviewed staff. Former reporters described it as a place that lets journalists be their fully idealized selves, allowing them to ignore broader challenges within the industry economically and to practice their craft to the fullest. These

earlier themes within their autobiographical memory paint a picture of a near-paradise of journalistic pursuits, shaping a strong sense of journalistic identity.

Abundance

The language used in early recollections describing work as a BuzzFeed journalist often centers around the extraordinary professional circumstances, painting it as a “dream” and “fantasy.” The theme of abundance portrays the newsroom as an ideal place to practice journalism, from the excitement of developing opportunities to the newsroom aesthetics. The optimism is palpable in these earlier memories, especially for journalists coming from other organizations within the industry that had faced economic troubles. In their earlier memories of BuzzFeed News, economic challenges felt distant; the only concerns over practicing and acting as a journalist were dreaming big enough.

For example, senior culture reporter Albert Samaha came to the BuzzFeed National desk from the *Village Voice*, a local newspaper that was “facing [an] existential crisis.” Coming to BuzzFeed was like entering a different world. Not only was there the money to do the professional work so many journalists strive to do, but Samaha described a place full of happy people satisfied with their work. “It felt like a fantasy — excess and money and bright colors and whimsically shaped chairs all around,” Samaha remembered in the piece. “I couldn’t believe such a place existed in the journalism industry.”

Through these collected memories, many reporters clearly cherished the difference BuzzFeed made in their professional lives. Investigative reporter Tom Warren contrasted the “dream” of working at BuzzFeed with the rest of the industry, having lived through such an extravagant and freeing professional experience, saying the rest of the industry looked “insipid and gray in comparison.” The great abundance had seemingly improved their professional life and work, and they identified how rare that was within the industry.

Journalistic Freedom

Most BuzzFeed reporters cherished the ability to practice their craft to its absolute fullest, without limitations to pursue stories and give them the attention they deserved, a dream for anyone who identified closely with the values of journalism. Out of the memories of abundance emerged a fully idealized view of journalistic practice. Looking back at their investigative work, Tom Warren remembered the results of all the work his unit was able to produce at the time, following journalistic pursuits to the fullest while developing impactful stories. The near-limitless resources fed the youthful ambition of the team’s reporters to produce the highest quality work. As Warren recalled, “We had the wind at our backs and had a beast of a fucking time. It was majestic.”

Others identified how working in the BuzzFeed newsrooms allowed for a journalistic curiosity they had never been afforded before. No stories were off limits, not only because of their financial freedom but because of the organization’s emphasis on creativity. Former managing editor Sara Yasin recalled this balance between freedom and focus, which the newsroom practiced as truly unique to BuzzFeed, that impacted the relationship and trust among coworkers. “It’s kind of magical to be a large group that’s on the same wavelength in that way,” Yasin remembered. “It’s the most fearless I’ve ever been professionally, because I felt like everyone on staff had each other’s backs even when they didn’t agree.” The ideal of finding and reporting the truth helped avoid any frivolousness, even as the reporters recalled following leads they would not have at other

organizations. In many of these recollections, BuzzFeed was a great place to work because the resources allowed for a camaraderie built on a focused goal of producing the best journalism possible.

Idealized Journalistic Perspective

This oral history also showed an idealized vision of *what journalism should be* to these reporters and editors. Political reporter Zoe Tillman stated that BuzzFeed reporters “had the freedom to write the way we actually talked to each other and to be honest with readers. It built trust.” Journalists identified with the way they were able to build relationships with sources and listen to audiences as they published, allowing them to feel they treated stories with more honesty. Claudia Koerner, deputy director of breaking news, recalled how, after the Uvalde school shooting, the newsroom sent out on social media that “the cops had fucked up. It was the truth, everyone was thinking it, but we actually got to say it.” This identity formed out of the mixture of freedom, creativity, and ability to follow trending stories and developed a newsroom without the stuffiness or elitism of traditional journalistic attitudes. Several others identified with how this attitude created camaraderie in the newsroom and a lack of competition between the reporters. BuzzFeed’s identity became a place where, collectively, the goal was to produce good journalism that told the truth.

Others highlighted BuzzFeed’s global reach, one that looked outside the narrow perspective of New York and Washington, DC, which dominate American newsrooms. This was indicative of an idealized view of uncovering important stories, no matter where they were, and serving a wide audience. Monica Mark, the organization’s first Africa correspondent, identified with the important perspective she was able to develop within the organization’s creativity and grow a substantial audience, earning millions of views on important topics. “I don’t think there’s anywhere else on the internet that political stories about Africa are getting that many eyeballs!” she recalled. “Honestly, I still get emotional thinking about what this tiny World desk team achieved in such a short time.” Just as there were seemingly no limits to the abundance of access, there were no limits to the stories and people these journalists could reach. The organization’s former editor-in-chief, Ben Smith summed it up concisely: “We loved news and weren’t snobs.” This ethos of creative, ambitious, and collaborative became central to how many BuzzFeed journalists idealized their professional identity.

Identity at Disruption: Practical-driven

However, all was not rosy at BuzzFeed News. The discourse highlighted the tensions between ideological and practical identity formation. Freedom and lack of institutional structure within the organization proved to be a boon and a bane. Former executive editor Doree Shafir stated that while “the mandate was to grow, grow, grow,” the founding members and team leaders lacked a clear sense of launching and maintaining multiple beats.

Defining News and Beyond

It wasn’t until 2014 that BuzzFeed News became a separate segment from the Buzz and Life sections, which Katie Notopoulos, senior tech reporter, defined as “a result of some

sort of nightmare *Mothra vs. Godzilla* fight.” Even former editor-in-chief Ben Smith noted, “I was always ambivalent about splitting News. It felt culturally inevitable after the political and social climate changed ... News was too dark to be next to the BuzzFeed Brand — but I had some worries.” At this point, the news organization and its members began shifting their identity from a scrappy and innovative newsroom driven by their ideology to one closely resembling their mainstream competitors. While they actively embraced their identity resembling a tech startup, adapting their identity as a news organization came with challenges. Senior reporter Ellie Hall recollected being the first hire of the news team in 2013 and noted, “The first big test of our operation was the Boston Marathon bombings, and those long days made it clear to all of us that we needed an adult in the room.” Still, they were able to build credibility and reputation. Albert Samaha recalled their experience from having to spell out the organization’s name to not having to do so anymore in 2016. The newsroom built on its journalistic identity to win a Pulitzer Prize, which Megha Rajagopalan stated, “I think it’s probably a function of the level of trust editors put in reporters at BuzzFeed News, which I think would be harder for early and mid-career reporters to gain elsewhere.” By continuing to work on their craft and their collective identity as an organization, they were able to cement their authority as a news organization while still trying to experiment on other platforms, leading to a sense of uncertainty.

Throughout its organizational life trajectory, the newsroom grappled with a sense of uncertainty, not only in its organizational identity but also in its strategy. Doree Shafrir, the former executive editor, said, “Like they would launch projects, and it would be the hot new thing for like six months, and then they would be like, Actually, never mind. The relationship between News and main BuzzFeed, and then with video, was insane. Like, no one was in charge.” From experimenting with shows on Facebook Live and Snapchat to creating video podcasts with Spotify, the identity of BuzzFeed News was constantly in flux, adapting and changing over an extended time period. Venessa Wong, senior culture reporter, noted,

BuzzFeed’s business model kept changing ... When BuzzFeed spun off a separate news website (BuzzfeedNews.com) in 2018, I was seriously worried that we were being cut off from the lifeblood of BuzzFeed.com, and its massive audience, not to mention its sales and business resources.

Like other news organizations in the industry, BuzzFeed identified and emphasized hard news stories despite being heralded as an entertainment-focused platform based on their viral stories and listicles. Former entertainment reporter Adam B. Vary recalled the time of the Harvey Weinstein story and noted that “Ben, who’d spent years treating the Entertainment News desk with benign neglect, suddenly became fixated on the fact that we had not, somehow, landed the biggest and most difficult entertainment news story in my lifetime.” These instances not only indicated tension and uncertainty in their organizational identity but also highlighted the tensions between ideological and practical perspectives among the organizational members.

Ideological-Practical Tensions

Throughout the oral history, many newsroom members recalled moments of outlandish spending on parties involving acrobats, fire dancers, robots, oysters, and the Wizarding

World of Harry Potter. While the organization's identity was initially built on abundance, many believed it was almost too good to be true. When she first started working in Los Angeles in 2016, Editor-in-Chief Karolina Waclawiak recalled being told about valet services: "I was so confused. This was normal? Yes, apparently it was." They drew on their own practical knowledge of the news industry from personal experiences and institutional awareness to be wary of the identity created at inception, like Albert Samaha stating, "I remember thinking, like, Damn, either we're saved, or we're doomed." Interestingly, journalists at BuzzFeed News started noting their organizational decline when company parties became smaller in magnitude. Internet culture reporter Ikran Dahir said, "All of this felt very ridiculous when redundancies in the UK were announced just a few months later that year."

This practical-driven view was also evident in their worries about expenses for their reporting. Karolina Waclawiak recalled, "When I first started, I asked what our budget was for the Culture desk and was told, "Don't ask or you might get one," from someone who worked in Finance. When I saw what editors were paying for stories on other desks I was in absolute shock. I knew it couldn't last." Veronica Dulin, DC office manager and editorial assistant, recalled the White House Correspondence Dinner after party and noted, "They'd lay off journalists ... then throw this fucking rager for tens of thousands of dollars in April in order to get what, access for the journalists we'd laid off?? It was absolutely insane and only done for clout." The tension between their idealized identity and practical identity was especially evident. Employees expressed displeasure with the organization's practices and grappled with grounding their organizational identity. Overall, these moments illustrate a gradual but significant transformation, where uncertainty and precarity reshaped the organization's self-understanding. This led to a slow and gradual change in their identity, which grappled with ideological and practical collective identity conflicts. While the signs of collapse were evident, many were still caught off guard by the final shutdown.

Identity at the Point of Closure: Emotional-driven

As the discourse built through the organization's timeline and led to the time closer to its inevitable death, the employees turned to their emotional and affective reasoning to process and communicate their identity. Though the shutdown came abruptly, their identity processing shifted a few years prior as buyouts, layoffs, and downsizing in the international and national bureaus were rampant.

Closure Shock

While some of the employees had suggested that BuzzFeed's expenditure on stories, office parties, and other social events was precarious and too good to be true, the announcement of the actual shutdown shocked them. Senior reporter, David Mack said, "Once we started closing international offices ... , it was clear to everyone we'd expanded too fast, and the good times were coming to an end." Even the day before the shutdown was announced, the team lunch was a "cutting-edge, robotics-powered mobile pizza restaurant created by a team of former SpaceX engineers."

Despite the stages of grief not being the focus of this study, we found that the employees experienced various stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance

at different temporal points leading up to the organizational death. Employees used emotional language, including “devastated” and “shocking,” to process the news of their closure. Investigative reporter Tom Warren said, “There was a lot of anger in those early sackings — we all had a sort of codependent relationship with BuzzFeed, and people felt like they were being dumped.” This emotional entanglement reaffirmed a connection to the ideological identity shaped during the organization’s inception. Senior culture reporter, Scaachi Koul said:

I’m devastated about a lot, but high on my list are all the stories I still wanted to do ... These stories will live elsewhere, I know, but their conceptions and conceits are a testament to this bizarre, sometimes hectic, sometimes languid, always expansive place. The more I think about the work we did, the more this closure is solidified in my own mind as a mistake.

Through the discourse, it is interesting to note that, unlike other cases of sudden organizational death, members of BuzzFeed News started going through the process of grief since early layoffs started. There were clear emotional ties, revealing blurred lines between the professional and personal identities of those at the organization. Losing the organization was not as simple as losing a job, even with the material challenges that came with the news. Deeper connections were drawn out and stressed as the organization approached its death.

In moments of rapid organizational change, identity shifts occurred when employees created, joined, and actively participated in the formation of a union. As Albert Samaha recalled, the “Pod Squad” layoff was the birthing point for the union. This changed the identity roots from organization-centric based on the ideologies to more individual-centric based on the employees’ emotions and camaraderie. There was a greater sense of bargaining, both figuratively and literally. As former politics reporter Rosie Gray recalled, “We fought for the work-share agreement instead of layoffs, and I’m still really proud that the union was able to save those jobs at that time. Even if it didn’t last.” The overall grief process within the organizational members leading up to the closure was experienced in ripples over the years. However, it is interesting to note that the triggers were episodic, coming in waves and causing rapid change when they occurred.

Nostalgic Discourse

Despite the shock, members of the news organization emphasized a nostalgic “good past/bad present” narrative to memorialize their organizational identity (Gabriel, 2003). Former Australian reproductive rights reporter, Gina Rushton, said,

I wouldn’t change a second of it, except maybe for the inevitable end to us being a forgotten outpost when we got unceremoniously laid off, at 2 am our time, on my birthday, in the early scary days of a pandemic.

The employees drew on emotions of *gratitude* rather than regret to continue aligning their collective identity with the organization’s. Reporter Anna Betts wrote, “I will forever cherish those months working with the dream team on such an impactful piece and embracing the chaos that came with it.” While there was a sense of regret towards the organizational death, the heightened sense of nostalgia worked towards memorializing the identity of BuzzFeed News, cementing its place in journalism history as irreplaceable.

Although one can argue that oral histories are retrospective (Decker, Hassard, and Rowlinson 2021), thereby inevitably evoking a sense of nostalgia, they play a crucial role in journalists' identity work. Despite ongoing identity struggles, the journalists did not overtly challenge their collective identity at the point of organizational death. Instead, they worked on securing the memory of their past identity.

Legacy Building

This nostalgic impulse supported the creation of a memorialized legacy identity. Journalists expressed pride in their recollections, specifically towards BuzzFeed's focus on journalistic freedom, audience reach, and experimentation. Audience engagement editor, Zia Thompson wrote,

It's just now hitting me that there probably won't be another place that will let me make a dick joke about Jeff Bezos's rocket on TikTok, write thirsty copy for a story about hoochie daddy shorts, or come up with clever punny headlines for the homepage whenever I want, and that makes me sad.

Senior culture reporter, Venessa Wong, recalled a story about McDonald's \$1 mozzarella sticks that was read by half a million people, stating, "It was a level of reach I had never experienced before, and it was absolutely thrilling and terrifying. There was a clear sense that if something was being said online, people were hearing it from BuzzFeed." During their peak, BuzzFeed was synonymous with viral stories that would not appear on other mainstream media outlets, highlighting the unique nature of their news work that was different from industrialized standards of journalism.

Journalists frequently mentioned the creative autonomy compared to other news organizations in the field. Senior reporter David Mack said, "I have never had as much freedom and fun doing anything in my life. In 8.5 years, I never had a single idea rejected. Nothing was off-limits," and photo editor Kenneth Bachor said,

BuzzFeed News was a dream job for me. Bouncing ideas off editors and writers at BuzzFeed News was a pleasure because I knew I wasn't going to be judged — it felt nice to collaborate and feel comfortable, which is sometimes not the easiest feeling to have in a newsroom.

While organizational research does not usually account for professional identity, which is particularly strong within journalism, the repeated mentions of journalistic autonomy and freedom indicate the boundary work that aligns with the profession's idealistic self-image. Additionally, the organization's members shared the collective identity of innovators and pioneers of journalism through BuzzFeed, which created new practices that became institutionalized and socialized within the field of journalism. For instance, they call on their newsroom's work on news curation, where Director of Newsroom Strategy and experiments Brandon Wall was proud of "the way news organizations approached push alerts changed almost overnight with the launch of the BuzzFeed News app." He continued to state:

We were breaking down complicated stories into visual, bite-size chunks that's now pretty common all the way back in 2015. We were building direct relations with our readers (we had a BuzzFeed News App Facebook Group!). And as alumni of these teams moved on to other news organizations, our core ideas and approaches spread.

Scaachi Koul poetically echoed this sentiment: "But so it goes: We're all fuzzy little pappi getting blown off a dandelion stem by a strong breeze. We'll all land somewhere, and

we'll pollinate anew." These statements are examples of how BuzzFeed cemented its impact on the field of journalism and the legacy its organizational members carry with them after its death, thereby memorializing the identity constructed at its inception that was more ideologically driven.

The intention and need to go back to the so-called golden days were evident in the hiring of the last editor-in-chief, Karolina Waclawiak, whom Sam Henig described as "the perfect person to lead BuzzFeed News into its next chapter, to bring back that fun crazy energy from the early Ben Smith days — the kind of delight that spills onto the page." Overall, these findings reveal that BuzzFeed News' OI evolved over the years, culminating in a final portrayal that nostalgically revisited its idealized origins, choosing to honor its formative values while selectively acknowledging, but not commemorating, its challenges and controversies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study not only validate existing research on the temporal fluidity of identity, continuing to challenge the Albert and Whetten (1985) notion of identity enduring time and change, but also identifies the trajectory of identity shifts leading up to the memorialization of an organizational identity at the end of the organizational lifespan. Figure 1 maps the process of identity memorialization for BuzzFeed journalists, drawing on three drivers of identity formation within the organizational autobiographical history of their lifespan. At the initial stage of inception, where the organizational members construct their identity, the journalists draw on ideological understandings of a distinctive identity, including financial abundance and journalistic freedom, to develop an idealized journalistic perspective unique to the organization. Driven by ideology, this identity solidifies the mission and vision of the organization, which challenged traditional ways of producing journalism by emphasizing creativity and innovation. The tech startup and outside-the-box mindset of the journalists set the tone for the organization, cementing an identity for BuzzFeed that centers on a form of creative chaos. As the organization and its members are faced with a trigger of organizational change that is slow and continuous without creating a stark shock to the organizational system, in this case, the separation of the news and entertainment division, an identity shift

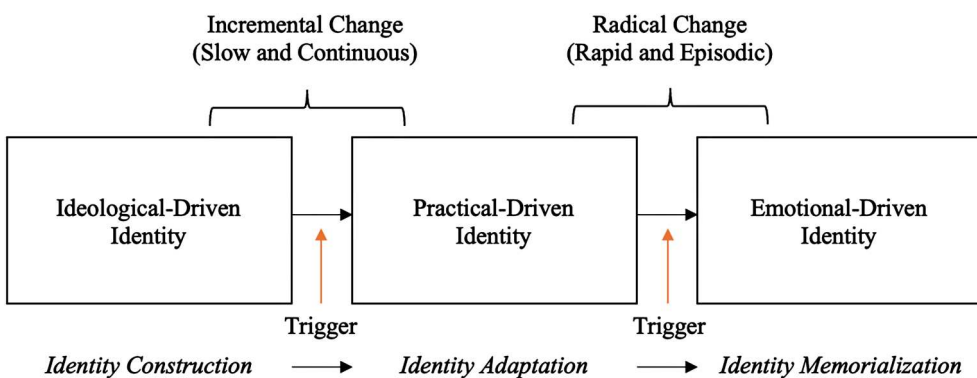


Figure 1. Theoretical model of identity memorialization at the end of an organizational lifespan.

occurs within the organization, showcasing how the organization stood the test of time. This incremental change in the organizational identity leads journalists to grapple with and adapt to a new identity. BuzzFeed journalists try to demarcate their identity as a journalistic organization and an innovation hub. While doing so, they adapt their initial identity through the practice of journalism that aligns with certain institutional and socialized ideologies of journalism, which they had previously challenged. This led them to shift their identity formation mindset from ideology to practical, based on the reality of the journalistic institution.

At this point of identity adaptation, journalists are faced with tensions between their previously defined ideological identity and their current practical identity. This tension caused a crisis of identity among the journalists, who grappled once again with the question of who we are as an organization. When there are existing tensions in their collective identity, a rapid organizational change trigger in the form of organizational death can lead to another identity shift that is concerned about the future memory of their identity. As shown in the findings above, BuzzFeed News faced multiple rapid and episodic incidents of change in the form of layoffs, buyouts, and downsizing. Therefore, despite the challenges of adapt a central, distinctive, and enduring identity during the organization's lifespan (Albert and Whetten 1985), they did so during its death by memorializing the identity of the organization using emotion and affect. Through their autobiographical discourse, they cemented the role of BuzzFeed in creating a lasting impact on the field of journalism and communicating a collective organizational identity that heralds back to the ideologized identity created at its inception. In their final memorialization of BuzzFeed's organizational identity, the journalists actively chose to identify with the organization's journalistic freedom, abundance mindset, and internal camaraderie instead of focusing on the setbacks and challenges. This indicates the strength of identity construction at the start of an organization's lifecycle to be ultimately enduring (Albert and Whetten 1985), despite going through the process of dynamic identity construction (Gioia et al. 2013).

While prior research on organizational identity (OI) change has largely focused on moments of radical transformation, such as those prompted by mergers, acquisitions, or responses to external threats (Clark et al. 2010; De Bernardis and Giustiniano 2015; Drori, Wrzesniewski, and Ellis 2013; Ravasi and Schultz 2006), this study proposes a more incremental and internally driven conceptualization of *identity evolution*. Rather than constituting a complete redefinition of the organization's outward-facing identity, *identity evolution* refers to the gradual and often implicit internal shifts in how members make sense of who they are as an organization. These shifts are motivated not by external shocks alone, but by the dynamic interplay of ideological commitments, everyday practices, and affective attachments within the organization. This conceptualization builds upon and nuances the enduring view of organizational identity, which suggests that identities remain relatively stable over time. Instead of perceiving identity as static until disrupted by crisis, this study argues that organizational identity is continually evolving through small, accumulated adaptations. These adaptations often occur to better align internal values with work culture, without necessarily altering how the organization presents itself externally. In this way, identity evolution is distinguished from identity reconstruction: the latter involves deliberate and strategic rearticulation of identity, while the former is a more organic and ongoing process shaped by internal dynamics.

Though evolutionary in nature, this process can still be punctuated by moments of adaptation, triggered by both internal tensions and external pressures.

This study carries several key implications, shedding light on how organizational identity is constructed, memorialized, and emotionally engaged with at the end of an institution's life. By examining the rhetorical history of BuzzFeed News through an autobiographical memory presented in their metajournalistic oral history, this study traces the unfolding of an organization's identity over time, ultimately leading to identity memorialization. While scholars of organizational identity change often emphasize the continuity of identity across time, where a prospective future identity is derived from past or present identity (Schultz 2016), this research presents a different perspective. It argues that in the moment of an organization's end, where no future identity exists, the organization instead enshrines the idealized identity set forth at its inception, embodying its aspirational "who we want to be" narrative. This memorialization, while honoring the organization's past (Suddaby, Schultz, and Israelsen 2020), does not erase historical imperfections; rather, it encourages members to reflect affectively on the organization's turbulent history.

Importantly, this research sets a precedent for examining how journalists use oral histories to document legacy, particularly in times of heightened precarity within the field of journalism. As seen in recent examples, such as Slate's "complete history of Pitchfork" following its 2024 merger with GQ (Kois, Pahwa, and Winkie 2024) and Late Night Show host Seth Meyers' anniversary oral history presented in video and podcast formats, journalists are increasingly reclaiming control over their narratives and memory through both journalistic platforms and adjacent actors. While the use of oral histories in journalism is not new, this study highlights an emerging trend of journalists actively shaping their legacy narratives in response to industry instability. Future research could further explore this shift, particularly the archival value of these narratives, expanding both organizational and journalism studies by deepening our historical understanding through rhetorical analysis. Additionally, understanding these oral histories as metajournalistic discourse helps stabilize the memory work of these organizations within the broader institutional identity of journalism.

It is important to note that this study has certain limitations. First, it focuses on a single case—BuzzFeed News—whose identity is reconstructed through an oral history created by its own members. This introduces potential bias, as participants may selectively frame their narratives to craft a specific legacy. Second, because the researchers did not conduct the interviews, there may be gaps or underrepresented voices in the discourse. Third, as a qualitative case study, the theoretical model developed here requires further testing across different organizational contexts to assess its broader applicability.

Moreover, BuzzFeed News operated under distinctive conditions—as a venture-backed, digitally native newsroom embedded within a global entertainment brand—that may not reflect the structural or cultural realities of legacy media or smaller outlets. Its trajectory, shaped by rapid growth, editorial innovation, and sudden collapse, is not universally replicable. However, its international presence and symbolic status within digital journalism make it a valuable case. BuzzFeed's rise and fall echo broader global patterns, seen in the closures of HuffPost South Africa, Vice's international bureaus, and Quartz's regional editions. These global parallels suggest that while the

specifics of BuzzFeed's case are unique, the broader emotional, ideological, and structural dynamics explored here are widely resonant. Thus, the analytical framework developed in this study offers a transferable lens for understanding how journalists across diverse contexts navigate organizational identity amid sustained disruption, even as its application must be carefully adapted to account for varying institutional realities.

Overall, this study's findings present a new perspective and novel theory on exploring identity evolution and memorialization during organizational death by examining BuzzFeed's oral history. We argue that identity construction in collectives adapts a dynamic process to create an enduring identity that gets memorialized among internal and external members of the organization, despite passing through several identities that ebb and flow through temporal periods. While organizational identity as a strategy for organizational survival has been studied in recent years (Anthony and Tripsas 2016; Bövers and Hoon 2021), future research can use this theoretical framework to explore the strategic communication of identity when there is no future for an organization and the ongoing evolution of identity, specifically in terms of memory and remembrance. Especially in the field of journalism, where news organizations are faced with economic, social, and cultural precarity, understanding how journalists and news organizations make sense of their identity during times of change is essential to understanding the enduring identity of the institution.

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