

## Abstract

The merger and acquisition process is usually examined with little attention addressing newspaper portrayals of the situation. A content analysis of 503 articles discussing the 2008 Delta/Northwest Airlines merger from the *Star Tribune* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* over a 21-month period was performed in order to detect framing differences. The application of social identity theory was used to examine the prominent framing variations based on in-group and out-group coverage of the merger. As expected, the newspapers focused more dominantly on the in-group airline when covering the merger and varied slightly in their framing techniques.

In 2008, individuals boarded planes a total of 746.9 million times using U.S. airports (Shaufele, 2009), which is equivalent to every American boarding a plane twice. The airline industry has been examined in a variety of contexts from customer satisfaction (Myong-Jae & Geddie, 2006) to technological advances (McIvor, O'Reilly, & Ponsonby, 2003), but little research has examined how the strategic business decision of mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in the airline industry are framed in newspapers. An important strategy, gaining support in the airline industry, is the use of M&A. Ever since the passing of the Airline Deregulation Act in 1978, M&A have become more prevalent. Yet, little research addresses how the media portrays M&A from announcement to fruition. M&A usually involve drastic changes for the parties directly involved (acquiring and acquired firms) and the communities that house the organizations. For this reason, M&A provide a unique opportunity to examine how newspapers portray the M&A through the framing of issues. Several studies have assessed the impact of M&A from a financial and strategic perspective (Datta, 1991), but little attention is paid to how media are involved in the process. The current study used a content analysis to examine how 2 separate newspapers in communities directly related to the merger (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* & *Star Tribune*) framed the topic with varying tone, space, and time references. The articles were examined to reveal changes in coverage of the Delta/NWA merger from the time the merger was announced into the months following its completion.

### **History of Mergers and Acquisitions in the U.S. Airline Industry**

The Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) governed airline M&A until October 1978, when the Airline Deregulation Act was signed into law. During their four-decade governing period, only

11 mergers were approved (Air Transit Association [ATA], 2010). Since passing the Airline Deregulation Act, 30 mergers have been completed or proposed. Over the past few decades, organizations have used M&A to expand their organizational capabilities and improve their competitive market positions (Gaughan, 1999). Yet with the influx of M&A, the failure rate of M&A to meet the desired purpose is still between 55-70 percent in the United States (Carleton, 1997). The explanations for the large failure-rate are numerous, but one of the more recent explanations pertains to the human side of M&A (Buono & Bowditch, 1989). This view of M&A focuses on the integration stages of mergers (Seo & Hill, 2005) and how they impact the employees and communities; the current research is concerned with the initial combination and stabilization stages. The initial combination stage begins after the announcement of the M&A, and ends immediately after the legal dissolve. This stage is associated with high levels of organizational conflict between the two institutions (Marks & Mirvis, 1992). Organizational stability recurs during the stabilization stage, resulting in lower levels of internal conflict. Framing and social identity theory can be applied to the human relation explanation of M&A through addressing the involvement of employees and the surrounding communities in the implementation and maintenance of the merger.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory (SIT) posits that an individual's identity is derived from a variety of group memberships, including nations and organizations (Kramer, 1991). Once individuals associate themselves with a particular group, the individual will seek to maintain, protect or enhance his/her group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The result of one having a social identity is the tendency to display in-group favoritism and to be negatively biased to out-groups (Marks & Mirvis, 1992), but one's social identity is fluid and can be changed. Previous studies have

examined the application of SIT in the framing of newspaper stories for national identities. The framing of stories depended on the association with national identity; reports were more favorable for one's own national identity than for the national identity of other countries (Rivenburgh, 2000; Jones & Sheets, 2009). Although the Rivenburgh (2000) and Jones and Sheets (2009) studies were concerned with national identity, the principles of SIT can be applied to a variety of contexts, including organizations and local communities. Jones and Sheets (2009) suggest that it is in the journalists', and therefore newspapers', best interest to align their stories with the predominant cultural sentiment. Newspapers, by their very nature, serve as messengers for the community they serve by providing information and local perspectives. Ashforth and Mael (1989) view organizational identity as a subtype of SIT, with organizational identity representing the distinctive attributes that individuals associate with their membership to the organization (Hogg & Terry, 2000). The increase in community involvement demonstrated by organizations has expanded the boundaries of organizational identity to include local community identities. For example, NWA established Northwest Air-Cares program and was awarded a Quality of Life Award by the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce for their charitable actions directed towards the local community. The lines between community identity and organizational identity blend together; thus, the M&A affecting NWA directly impacts the Minneapolis, MN community. Newspapers have been associated with the development of local identities and reflect features of the collective view (Anderson, 1991; Kaniss, 1991); thus examining the frames used to describe the merger between Delta and NWA in newspapers provides a glimpse into the communities' perspective of the merger. The M&A examined in this research pertains to the union of Delta Airlines and Northwest Airlines (NWA) in 2008. Analysis of the aviation industry, Delta and NWA more specifically, revealed a desire for consolidation to combat the

rising fuel costs (Kumar, 2008). This particular M&A provided unique challenges of combining different divisions in which unions were present in one organization and absent in the other, contracts pertaining to headquarter locations (NWA agreeing to maintain its headquarters in Minnesota), along with the traditional issues found with integrating two separate organizations. In addition, leading up to the M&A both Delta and NWA reduced their domestic capacity by 10% and 5% respectively (Kumar, 2008).

During a successful M&A, employees have to de-identify with their old organizational identity so they are able to identify with the new organization (Elsbach, 1999). Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain switching group memberships as a reaction to the low status groups failing to provide members with positive social identity and thus cause members to seek alternative and more beneficial groups. Specifically addressing M&A, individuals who were part of the acquired organization may feel organizational loyalty to their old organization as detrimental to their future success. While employees may have nostalgia for their previous organization, there needs to be an adaptation in their attitudes towards the newly formed organization. After the completion of the merger, there should be a shift in the organizational identity of the merged firm and surrounding community to create a new organizational and social identity favoring the newly formed organization. As addressed in the previous section in-group bias should be present, except now it should pertain to the new organization.

### **Framing Theory**

Framing theory provides a useful tool for assessing how newspaper coverage may vary between in-groups and out-groups during the M&A process. Entman (1993) describes framing as the process whereby one selects “aspects of a perceived reality and make[s] them more salient in

a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). Specifically addressing news media, Gamson (1989) describes a frame as the central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is an issue. The study of frames in the context of M&A allows for the discovery of prominent topics, tone, timing, and space elements featured by newspapers identified with the in-group versus the out-group.

Framing issues or events in either positive or negative tones allows audiences to view public expressions of approval or disapproval of organizations and their actions (Elsbach, 1994). Tone is conceptualized in this context as the valence of the message ranging from positive to negative. Previous research has examined the impact of evaluation framing (positive, negative, or neutral tone) in newspapers (Haigh, 2010). Evaluation frames serve as a source of “social proof” that impacts individuals’ perception of the issue presented (Rao, Greve & Davis, 2001). In a business context, Pollock and Rindova (2003) found that the media could impact the formation of impressions about organizations through the positive or negative framing of information pertaining to initial public offerings.

Chyi and McCombs (2004) provided a measurement technique to help overcome the object specificity of previous framing measurements. The two-dimensional measurement format is based on space and time dimensions. Originally this technique was applied to newspaper coverage of the Columbine school shooting and has since been applied to other contexts including political blogs (Bichard, 2006). By combining these two dimensions, Chyi and McCombs (2004) postulate one can solve the cross-object generalizability problem found with object-specific assessments. The time dimension was divided into three categories consisting of past, present, or future. The space dimension consists of five interval levels on a continuum

ranging from the micro to the macro. The levels are defined, from micro to macro, as: (1) Individual: a news event framed with the scope pertaining only to the individuals involved in the event; (2) Community: a news event framed to be relevant to a certain community; (3) Regional: a news event that is framed to be relevant to a broader population; (4) Societal: a news event that is framed in terms of national or social importance; (5) International: a news event is framed pertaining to an international perspective. Chyi and McCombs postulate “during any news event’s life span, the news media often reframe the event by emphasizing different attributes of the event-consciously and unconsciously-in order to keep the story alive and fresh (2004, p.22).” Through a content analysis Chyi and McCombs (2004) found that the framing of the Columbine school shooting evolved from predominantly individual frames in the beginning into more societal frames. In contrast to the previous context space and time have been analyzed, mergers provide a more dynamic setting in which there is not a clear conclusion of the event due to the assimilation aspect of mergers. Throughout the course of a merger there is uncertainty that arises from the initial murmurs of the merger to abnormal increases in stock prices when the merger is announced (Andrade, Mitchell, & Stafford, 2001). The current study will further expand the limited research examining newspapers’ framing of M&A through the examination of the space, time, and tone emphasized by two newspapers directly involved with the Delta/NWA merger.

### **Research Questions**

As mentioned in previous sections, the variation in frames featured between in-group and out-group parties needs to be examined to determine the impact the M&A had on the local communities directly affected by the merger. The tone used to discuss the topics related to the merger indicates a frame of emphasis that is important and likely indicative of the community feelings toward the M&A process. The space dimension provides a unique context in which to

examine the overall perception the impact of the M&A had on multiple levels of all parties affected. In line with the previous discussion pertaining to the evolution of M&A over time and also how one's social identity changes throughout a merger, the time dimension needs to be examined to determine if there are any changes in emphasis throughout the evolution of the M&A. Thus, in order to further understand the implications of SIT throughout the newspaper coverage of a merger, and to have a better grasp of the frames used to depict the issue, the following two research questions are offered for the examination of two newspapers directly involved in the Delta/NWA merger:

**RQ1: How does the *Star Tribune* frame issues related to the merger and involved parties?**

The *Star Tribune* serves as the in-group for the NWA organization because it is located in Minneapolis, MN where the airline is headquartered. The time, space, and tone dimensions of framing coverage will be assessed to detect the emphasis made by the *Star Tribune* as the in-group for NWA. Discussion of Delta (the out-group) will also be examined.

**RQ2: How does the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* frame issues related to the merger and involved parties?**

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* serves as the in-group for the Delta organization because it is located in Atlanta, GA where the airline is headquartered. The time, space, and tone dimensions used to frame topic coverage will be examined in order to reveal the prominence featured by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* as the in-group for Delta. Coverage of NWA (the out-group) will also be examined.

## Method

A content analysis was conducted to address the above research questions. Content analysis is a systematic, objective, and quantitative method for studying communication messages and developing inferences concerning the relationship between messages and their environment (Krippendorff, 1980). Content analysis is used frequently in communication research to describe message characteristics, either as an independent method or in conjunction with other methods such as experiments or surveys (Neundorf, 2002). As the current study was an initial attempt at describing newspapers' use of frames during M&A, content analysis was an appropriate method. The current study followed an a priori design, where all decisions regarding variables, their measurements, and coding rules were formed prior to the gathering of data.

### Sampling Procedure

The population used in this study was obtained through the *Lexis-Nexis* database. Two newspapers were first selected from which to select a purposive sample that represented communities involved in the Delta/NWA merger. The newspapers chosen were the *Star Tribune* (circulation 320,000) and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (circulation 220,000). The *Star Tribune* is located in Minneapolis, MN where NWA is headquartered. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* is located in Atlanta, GA where Delta is headquartered. The authors performed a search of the *Lexis-Nexis* database using the keywords “merger” and “Delta” or “NWA” or “Northwest airlines” appearing in the body of these newspapers between the publication dates of January 1, 2008 to August 31, 2009. The time period selected used the date of the first mention of a potential merger between Delta and NWA (*The Star Tribune*- January, 2008) and a date ten

months after the merger was complete. The ten months after completion corresponds to the amount of time transpiring between the first mention of the merger to completion.

The search yielded a total of 597 articles. During the analysis process duplicate articles were removed. Articles were also removed if the topic matter of the articles were irrelevant to the merger, such as mentions of “merger street” and the “river delta.” The *Star Tribune* featured a total of 164 articles related to the merger, while the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* had 339 articles on the topic. This resulted in a final census of 503 total articles from the two newspapers.

### **Coding Units**

When performing a content analysis using newspapers as a medium there are several options when determining the unit of analysis ranging from a single sentence to the entire article. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2001) describe four benefits of using the entire message: the unit of analysis as objectively identifiable, there are a manageable set of cases, the unit parameters are determined by the author of the message, and one can exhaustively and exclusively contain the object of interest. For these reasons, the coding unit and the unit of analysis for this study was the entire article. Decisions regarding framing emphasis were applied to the article in its entirety. Thus, coders were instructed to select the single dominant frame as emphasized by the full article.

### **Variables**

Several variables were coded for each newspaper article in the study. Six objective variables consisting of publication, date, section, length, presence or absence of quotations, and presence or absence of graphics were coded. These were coded in order to obtain a more robust descriptive assessment of all elements featured when covering the M&A issue. Publication name

and section was coded based on the newspaper in which the article was obtained. The date of the article was recorded to establish a timeline and determine if the article came before or after the completion of the merger. Length was based on word count, which was available on the first page of all the articles obtained. The use of quotations and graphics were coded on a dichotomy of presence or absence.

Several variables were also coded to examine the framing dimensions emphasized by the newspapers. The dominant party discussed in the article was coded as Delta, NWA, both, or neither. The dominant tone featured was also assessed for each of the articles. Previous studies have emphasized the value of analyzing tone as one of the dimensions of the framing process (Bichard, 2006). As tone is a latent variable, it is important to establish coding rules that cue coders to look for certain elements in the content, such that those elements bring into play a schema shared by all coders (Potter & Lavine-Donnerstein, 1999). The tone of the article was divided into three mutually exclusive categories of positive, negative, and neutral as used in previous research (Bichard, 2006; Weber, 1990; Kweon, 2000 pertaining specifically to M&A). Positive tone reflects social cohesion and cooperation as well as economic stability or strength. If the article left the reader with a generally favorable view of the M&A or organizations involved either through the quantity of positive statements or the overarching sentiment of the article, it had a positive tone. Negative tone emphasized items involving social conflict, disorganization and economic uncertainty. Articles describing pessimistic issues such as job-loss or delays fit into this category. Items that reflected neither favorable nor unfavorable conditions or had a balanced view fell into the neutral category. Face validity for the coding system was observed through the link between SIT in-group/out-group perception and the coding categories. Thus the

requirements of the coding scheme being “logically consistent and the categories clearly defined” (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984) are met.

The time dimension of each article was coded based on the date in which the article was published. This resulted in the two categories of pre-merger and post-merger. All articles printed prior to October 29, 2008 comprised the pre-merger category, while those occurring on or after this date fell into the post-merger category.

The final variable coded was space, and consist of the same levels used by Chyi and McCombs (2004) and Bichard (2006). The levels included: (1) Individual: limited scope pertaining to individuals involved or affected by the merger, such as interviews with employees or the CEO of one of the merging companies; (2) Community: frames pertaining to a specific community or town, including discussions of organizational groups such as unions; (3) Regional: regarding a more general population, such as residents of a metropolitan area or state, impacts on state taxes, route changes throughout the state, or state legislation fall into this level; (4) Societal: frames addressing items of social or national pertinence, the discussion of multiple organizations besides Delta Airlines and NWA affected by the merger belong in this level; or (5) International: frames pertaining to an international perspective, such as international air travel, or outsourcing.

### **Coding Procedure**

Two coders were used to code the articles after a series of training. During the training session the coders were provided with information regarding the conceptual and operational definitions of each category. The manifest variables were recorded first and then the coder was instructed to read the article and determine the dominant party mentioned as well as the dominant tone and space frame emphasized in the article. During the training sessions the coders

were able to practice on sample newspaper articles and discuss variations in frame selections. Once the coders demonstrated a satisfactory understanding of the coding rules and procedures, the coders coded the same randomly selected 10 percent of the sample ( $n = 69$ ) newspaper articles as per Wimmer and Dominick's (2003) suggestion. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, because this calculation accounts for agreement reached by chance (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002) and has been described as "the measure of choice" (Dewey, 1983). The inter-coder reliability analysis resulted in the *dominant party* category having .87, the tone dimension having .89, and the space category having .87. As Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney, and Sinha (1999) suggest that a Cohen's kappa above .75 indicates excellent agreement beyond chance, signifying the results obtained from these variables should be interpreted as reliable.

## Results

A total of 503 articles were examined over a 21-month period, with the frequency of coverage changing drastically over time (Figure 1). Specifically, there was a pronounced increase in news coverage in April of 2008, the month in which the merger was officially announced, followed by a steady decrease until October of 2009. This time frame corresponds with when the merger was officially approved.

Descriptive statistics revealed some frequency data that provides a foundation for the frame analysis by showing how each newspaper featured graphics, length of articles, and other elements leading to the prominence of content. Both of the newspapers utilized quotations more than 75% of the time; specifically *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* used quotations 77.3%, *The Star Tribune* had the highest usage at 89%. The use of graphics was less frequent and had a

larger variety in utilization between the newspapers, with *The Star Tribune* with 53%, and the lowest frequency of graphic usage was *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* with 36%. Consistent across all newspaper categories, articles were featured in the Business section most frequently. The average length of the articles was 591 words. Article length varied between the newspapers with articles having a length of 251-500 occurring most frequently (34.2%) in *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, while 501-750 length articles were predominant in *The Star Tribune* (38.4%). Additionally, examination of the distribution of stories pre- and post-merger revealed for *The Star Tribune*, 85.4% of stories occurred prior to the merger approval and only 14.6% occurred after approval. *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* produced the majority of its stories prior to the merger (62.2%), but still produced 37.8% of their articles after the merger was official.

The frames emphasized by each of the newspapers were further analyzed in order to specifically address the research questions proposed.

RQ1 pertained to how the *Star Tribune* portrayed the merger and parties involved over a 21-month period. This question was addressed through the analysis of dominant airline mentioned, space, tone, time, and the interaction of these frames within the *Star Tribune* (n = 164). An initial analysis focused on whether NWA was the focal point of coverage considering that they are headquartered in Minneapolis where the *Star Tribune* is circulated and would therefore be considered the in-group for any merger discussion. Initial analysis revealed that NWA was indeed mentioned as the dominant focus in 26.2% of the articles compared with Delta, who was the primary focus in only 15.9% of the stories examined in the *Star Tribune*.

The dominant space dimension featured in the articles overall was community (40.9%)

followed by the regional frame at 25.6% (Table 1). Community focused stories include discussion about how the merger impacts the cities near the headquarters, such as this excerpt: “Northwest has 12,000 employees in Minnesota. Keeping the two reservation centers open, for instance, would affect about 900 employees, and 2,200 flight attendants would continue to be based at the Twin Cities. Steenland and Anderson did not address the future of the roughly 1,000 jobs at Northwest headquarters in Eagan” (*Star Tribune*, April 18, 2008). In contrast the focus on regional (within the space framing dimension) addressed statewide concerns such as the Metropolitan Airports Commission’s (MAC) concern about the merger. For example, “One common misconception is that if Delta violates any of the covenants on the bond agreement -- specifically those dealing with a Minnesota headquarters, hub status and employment levels -- the MAC could demand immediate repayment of the \$245 million and keep the money” (*Star Tribune*, November 13, 2008).

Specifically looking at stories with a dominant focus on NWA alone (Table 1), regional implications were mentioned most frequently (46.5%) followed by community and individual frames (25.6% and 16.3%, respectively). Articles focused primarily on Delta, in contrast, never mentioned an individual impact. Interestingly, the societal impact of the merger was predominantly used as a frame when both parties were included (69.2% of societal references). This pattern was consistent for both pre and post merger articles.

The overall tone of the articles analyzed from the *Star Tribune* was negative (56.1%), although the articles prior to the merger approval were framed negatively more often than after the approval (57.9% and 45.8%, respectively). Further examination of the tone across the dominant parties suggests that while negative was predominant followed by positive and neutral

for each dominant party the distribution varied (Table 1). Delta was referenced using a positive tone 30.8% of the time while only 18.6% of stories pertaining solely to NWA were positive.

RQ2 addressed how the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* covered the merger and the parties involved. Similarly to RQ1, this question will be addressed through a variety of variables and their interactions. With the Delta organization headquartered in Atlanta, an initial assessment investigated whether the in-group was again the dominant focus. Preliminary analysis revealed Delta was indeed the dominant party mentioned 56.9% of the time, while NWA was only mentioned 3.8%.

The leading space frame used in the articles overall was community (42.8%), followed by societal at 40.1% (Table 2). Community frames contained statements such as: "I have told Richard Anderson of my commitment to keep Delta a Georgia-based company, and he said that was his goal, too," Isakson said" (*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, January 11, 2008). Articles dominantly focused on Delta followed this pattern, but also included an emphasis on the international dimension (11.4%). When both parties were addressed, the societal frame was used nearly 50% of the time (49.6%). Societal stories from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* contained elements such as, "Delta's new chief executive Richard Anderson could find himself testifying before Congress too, but this time explaining why a major airline merger would be good for the country" (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 13, 2008). There was minimal difference in the space frames used between pre- and post-merger articles, with the largest difference being a 3.3% increase in the societal space frame.

In contrast to the *Star Tribune* the overall tone of the articles in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* were positive (45.1%) and only 39.2% were negative (Table 2). Articles prior to the approval of the merger and those after approval did not vary much in their tone, except for a

decrease in neutral tone from 18.5% to 10.9%, respectively. Further analysis revealed Delta focused articles were framed in a positive light most of the time (47.2%) while NWA focused coverage was predominantly portrayed with a negative tone (46.2%).

### **Discussion**

The current research provides a different application of SIT through the use of framing as a tool to analyze the manifestations of SIT. The use of space and tone helps to address the issue of framing being a “fractured paradigm” (Entman, 1993), through the ability to apply frame analysis to a variety of situations. While SIT has been applied in a variety of business settings, its application in mass communication tends to be limited to racial/ethnic topics. By expanding the application of SIT to newspapers, specifically in and out groups, there is potential to broaden the areas in which SIT currently can be employed to include a blend of business and communication research.

The content analysis presented in this article provided an examination of how different frames were utilized by local newspapers for in and out groups when providing coverage of a merger. The prevalence of the community frame by both of the newspapers was consistent with the previous findings of Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) who viewed place identification (identifying with the community in which you are a member) as an extension of SIT when evaluating London Dockland residents and their connection with their residence. It is important to note that throughout the Delta/NWA merger there were negotiations between different union groups, which influenced the number of articles addressing the community level. This was consistent with previous merger literature that suggests an important, and often over-looked, aspect of a merger is the employee assimilation (Buono & Bowditch, 1989). Additionally, the

societal space was the second most predominant space in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, this may be related to the desire to present an important business in the community in the context of providing a larger societal benefit.

The subtle change between the pre- and post-merger time frame corresponds with the complex and longitudinal nature of mergers (Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, Proper, & Jobin, 2000), with some scholars indicating the employee assimilation process could take up to seven years (Covin, Kolenko, Sigtler, & Tudor, 1997). The frequency of articles pertaining to the merger after the merger was announced consisted of only 30.2% of the total articles. The reduced number of articles could be attributed to the lack of newsworthiness of the topic after the ambiguity of whether the merger would take place was resolved.

Previous research has demonstrated that there are several different methods used to provide prominence to a particular topic; airline mergers were no exception. Ghanem (1994) noted placement and size as two common methods of providing prominence, and as a result salience, to an issue. Other frames discussed included graphics, quotes, and frequency. The results indicating the use of these mechanisms isn't surprising, but it is interesting to note that different newspapers used different framing mechanisms to increase the prominence of the issue.

Specifically addressing *The Star Tribune*, the use of quotations was most prominent. Quotations have been found to be a means of identity construction and there is a close connection between the use of quotations and the development of citizenship (Holsanova, 2006). Thus, *The Star Tribune* may have used quotations as a means of trying to invoke a stronger feeling of citizenship to combat an outside threat. The predominant tone used by *The Star Tribune* was negative, though it was surprising to discover that the newspaper was more positive

toward Delta than with NWA (30.8% and 18.6%, respectively). This finding corresponds with the identity enhancement strategy described by Ellemers, van Knippenberg, and Wilke (1990) of dissociation, where members of the “lower” or acquired group attempt to disassociate from their current in-group in order to become a member of the “higher” acquiring group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In contrast, the framing mechanism used by *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* to increase prominence was the frequency of news stories, with over half of the entire sample (339 articles). While Ghanem (1994) provides some insight into different framing mechanisms, she notes, “the frequency with which a topic is mentioned has a more powerful influence than any particular framing mechanism” (p.12). The large prominence provided by *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* also corresponds with the notion of increasing the importance of the in-group’s (Delta Airlines) status through the use of increased newspaper coverage. A disproportion in the tone of the two newspapers revealed *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* had a more positive tone. This supports the core notion of SIT to maintain and preserve self-esteem through the favorably biased assessment of your group (Terry, Carey, & Callan, 2001).

Consistent with SIT and previous M&A research, when the acquiring party (Delta) was the dominant party in the story it was primarily described in a positive tone. This was true for both papers. Over 45% of all articles in the sample, that were focused on Delta, had a positive tone. M&A scholars have addressed the importance of communication and positive encouragement when describing mergers to help ease the assimilation process for employees and the surrounding communities (Appelbaum et al., 2000), the findings from this research helps to support this claim. The in-group and out-group bias associated with a strong social identity was displayed through the amount of coverage the local directly affected newspapers devoted to the

dominant parties that correspond with their local community, *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* with Delta Airlines and *The Star Tribune* with NWA. The finding from this research also lends support to the notion that local newspapers serve as a conduit for forming a collective identity and symbolically reflecting features of the community (Anderson, 1991; Kaniss, 1991).

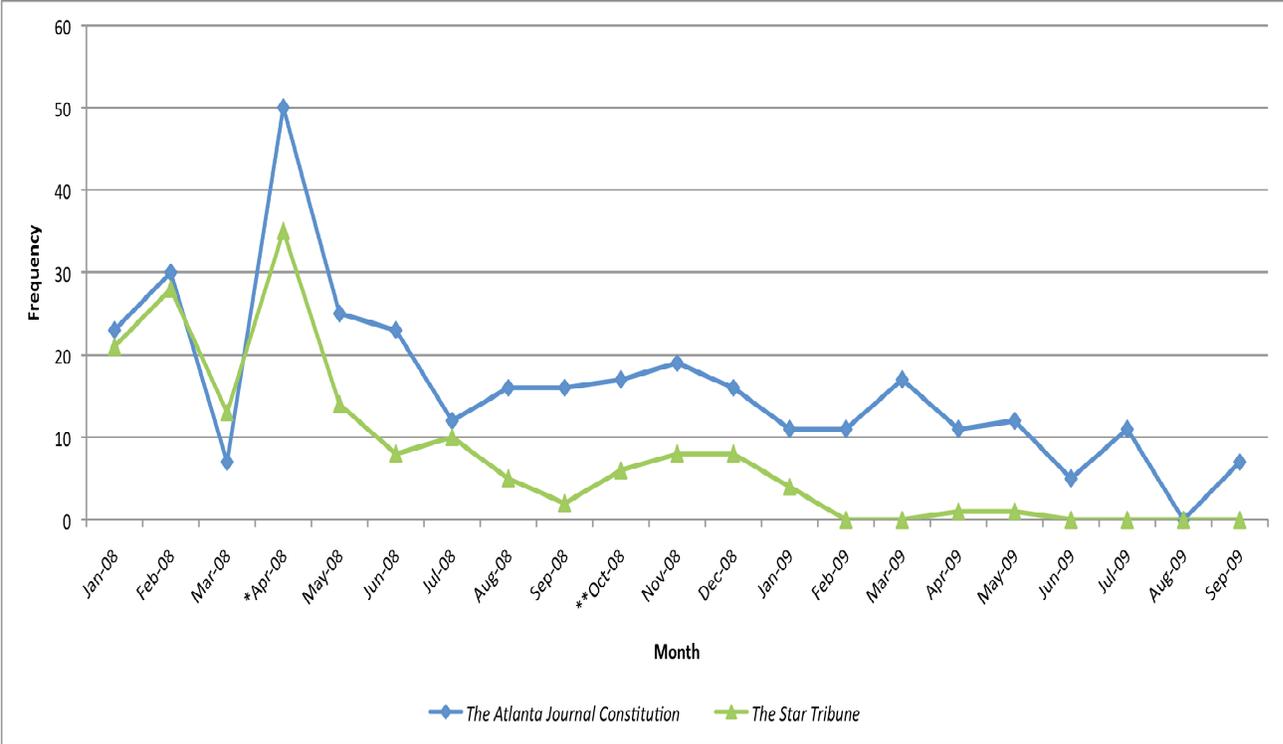
The practical implications of this research could help future mergers by providing an initial assessment of how newspapers depict the merging parties. Public relations practitioners and members of upper management need to be aware of how local newspapers describe the M&A and how this could affect not only the employee's acceptance of the merger, but also the surrounding communities. As previous research has shown that a majority of M&A fail, any added insight provided by assessing the media portrayal of the merger is beneficial.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The results of this study demonstrate that there is a difference in the newspaper discourse on the coverage of the Delta Airlines and NWA merger, and provides a starting point for future analysis of media coverage of mergers. While the current study provided initial insight into the framing used by two local newspapers, the limitations provide opportunities for future research. In order to develop a better understanding of SIT in M&A, future research should examine additional M&As and the assimilation patterns conveyed in newspapers and a variety of communities.

This article provided an initial analysis of how newspapers' portrayal of M&A differs depending on whether they are considered the in-group or out-group. Through the application of dimensional frames and framing mechanisms, the current analysis provides initial understanding of the complex nature of newspaper coverage surrounding mergers and acquisitions. Future

research should consider providing a multi-method analysis of the impact of M&A in relation to SIT. Through the inclusion of surveys of employees or in-depth interviews, researchers will further uncover potential factors influencing the evolution of in-group and out-group mentality during M&A.



Note: \*First official announcement of merger \*\*Governmental approval of merger

Figure 1. Frequency of merger mention by month

Table 1

*Star Tribune Framing Dimensions*

	Delta Focused	NWA Focused	Both	Total
<i>Space</i>				
Individual	0.0%	16.3%	6.3%	7.9%
Community	50.0%	25.6%	45.3%	40.9%
Regional	23.1%	46.5%	16.8%	25.6%
Societal	26.9%	11.6%	28.4%	23.8%
International	0.0%	0.0%	3.2%	1.8%
	100%	100%	100%	100%
<i>Tone</i>				
Positive	30.8%	18.6%	41.1%	33.5%
Neutral	7.7%	14.0%	9.5%	10.4%
Negative	61.5%	67.4%	49.5%	56.1%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 2

*Atlanta Journal-Constitution Framing Dimensions*

	Delta Focused	NWA Focused	Both	Total
<i>Space</i>				
Individual	7.3%	15.4%	3.0%	5.9%
Community	44.0%	53.8%	39.8%	42.8%
Regional	2.1%	15.4%	3.0%	2.9%
Societal	35.2%	15.4%	49.6%	40.1%
International	11.4%	0.0%	4.5%	8.3%
	100%	100%	100%	100%
<i>Tone</i>				
Positive	47.2%	30.8%	43.6%	45.1%
Neutral	14.0%	23.1%	17.3%	15.6%
Negative	38.9%	46.2%	39.1%	39.2%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

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