



A Tale of Two Weeklies

Episode 5: We Came in at the End

[music]

Duff Jamison: It was a tough job, a stressful job to try to keep those things alive essentially. Right.

Michael Nunweiler: Let's not mention any names. We'll leave names out of it.

Paul Matwychuk: I guess I would have been fired eventually because everyone eventually got fired at SEE.

Jeff Holubitsky: So sort of the level of experience and commitment and all those things was really going down.

Eamon McGrath: So a lot of the things that get written are not as good as they were when you had like three editorial levels to go through before it hit the page.

Gord Nielsen: And so in a way everybody, got what they deserved.

Eamon McGrath: Yeah, I mean to me it was like the last nail in the coffin of an era that had already ended by the time that I was involved in it.

NARR: For 26 years two rival magazines existed as the alternative weekly press in one blue collar, Canadian Prairie city. This is the story of Vue Weekly and SEE Magazine, two weekly papers that ran in Edmonton between 1992 and 2018. This is an elegy and love letter to those papers, their rise, glory days, notorious rivalry, and eventual decline. I'm Andrew Paul. I'm Fawnda Mithrush. And I'm Paul Blinov. This is A Tale of Two Weeklies.

NARR: There's a quote from the pilot episode of HBO's The Sopranos that rings true to what was happening at the weeklies, at least for us who arrived in the paper's offices in the mid 2000s. In the opening scene of the series, Tony Soprano laments that he's just finally made it to the top of New Jersey's organized crime world, he realizes he's inherited a kingdom in its final throws.

"It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came in too late for that and I know. But lately I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over."

NARR: Bad as this was for Tony's mental health, the weeklies management teams had their own stresses as society increasingly gathered in digital realms. Throughout the early 2000s, the world of print media struggled to catch up to changes wrought by the internet. There was a demand for more stories, more content on ever emerging platforms and advertisers were starting to explore cheaper routes of online promotion. The weeklies, like most print papers, were hit with declining ad revenue in their final



years, and SEE and Vue's bitter competition to secure ads within the same local pool, didn't make things easier. Though their final issues were seven years apart, both SEE and Vue's death spirals would follow similar patterns. The changes that marked the last few years of each were apparent to those who had long histories of the papers, but even those who are just starting out could feel the downward shift.

Eamon McGrath: And I didn't realize that I had come on to the whole, you know, the machine so late as like as a writer, but like it was already over.

NARR: This is Eamon McGrath, who started writing for the weeklies while he was still in high school. He's now a published author and musician who regularly tours internationally.

Eamon McGrath: It was an era where you read about a record and you went and you bought the record. And the way that I talk about that almost archaically. If you talk to people that were doing that in 1996 like they just think that's hilarious because to them it was already like the beginning of the end. It happened way before that and even thinking about it now, 2004, you know if I like I think back to reading record reviews and I was reading those reviews on Pitchfork, I didn't read a review of Mastodon's Leviathan like on the bus with like in the newspaper. I read it like on a computer.

NARR: By 2009 management was desperate for ideas on how to keep things going at the weeklies. Mastheads got smaller, space in each paper became sparse and even more dependent on ad sales. Office morale started to plummet. Staffers were let go in various often unceremonious ways as management tried to squeeze more and more work out of the staff that remained. Others simply saw the writing on the wall and quit. Some of those cuts, firings, and trims were necessary to survive in a tougher and tougher market. But the last major brain drains from the papers manifested themselves differently. At SEE Magazine, it was layoffs.

NARR: But back in 2008 SEE's masthead was still healthy. With two full time folks in the art department, a managing editor, a city/music editor, a news editor, a film/theater editor, and a staff writer, all commanding teams of freelancers to cover the city as they saw fit. This was about to change drastically. Gordon Nielsen had just finished his tenure as SEE's publisher. Nielsen had a long history at Great West newspapers as the company's CFO, and was managing SEE's billing around the time that Ron Garth had run up his printing debt. As Duff Jameson, Great West president recalls, Nielsen had always felt a connection to SEE.

Duff Jamison: Gordon was our chief financial officer. You know, he didn't come on to be the publisher of of SEE Magazine, but he had always had an interest in it. You know, he loved music. He attended a lot of those events. He felt a part of that community. So when we were looking at for, for a publisher at one point it was like, you know what, Gord, you've been very interested in this whole thing the whole time. Why don't you do both? Right. He didn't stop being the chief financial officer. He just added that to, was things to do.



NARR: After Nielsen stepped down in 2008, he was replaced by Todd Kosloski. Kosloski was Jamison's brother-in-law, and he had been working in ad sales and various outlets up to that point.

Duff Jamison: Well, he had sold advertising with us in the past. His sister had worked with us in his past and he ended up marrying my sister, you know, so he kind of got into the family that way. And I'm not sure how long Todd would have been in that role, but at that point, the alt weeklies were starting to feel the impacts of all these other things we were just talking about. Right. So it was a tough job, a stressful job to try to keep those things alive, essentially. Right. Keep them running in the black if at all possible.

NARR: Once Koslowski stepped in as publisher, changes started rippling down the masthead. In March 2008 SEE's music editor, Matthew Halliday, was abruptly canned, leading to an inhouse shuffle of the editorial department. A short time later, Kevin Wilson SEE's managing editor since 2001, stepped down. The art director who had overseen SEE's recent design overhaul, Jimmy Jeong, also left. This meant that the senior creative positions at the paper would need to be filled. Jeong's replacement was found in Michael Nunweiler, who had been mentored by Jeong in SEE's art department for the previous six months. Nunweiler, we'll note, designed the artwork for the series. He recalls working under Koslowski in those early days.

Michael Nunweiler: Todd, the publisher, that guy was wild. I remember at the time he told me he was selling speakers out of the back of a car in LA. I don't know if there's truth to this story, but definitely it definitely changed my perspective on him. I was just like, Oh shit. Okay.

NARR: Editorial staff were anxious to see who might be internally promoted into the managing editors role, or who Great West would hire from the outside. Great West went with the latter option. They dipped into the talent pool of unemployed Postmedia personnel who had been laid off or bought out as the Edmonton Journal suffered through its own reorganization in the face of nosediving ad revenues. In that pool they found Jeff Holubitsky.

Duff Jamison: Yeah. And Jeff had been with the with the Edmonton Journal. I mean he's a pure editorial guy, right. I pure a pure news guy and he also had to steer the ship at a difficult time of year, but he certainly knew the news business. I don't know whether Jeff was there when you were there at all, but you know, so he would have been able to help young writers particularly become better writers, show them what they needed to do to improve and, and those types of things.

NARR: Holubitsky had been a reporter at the Edmonton Journal for decades. He decided to take a buyout package in one of the earlier rounds of mass staff changes that Postmedia.



Jeff Holubitsky: I can't remember what year that was. 2006, 2007. They came in and offered buy outs and they wanted to get rid of people and it was really brutal. Our publisher had, had gone. Linda Hughes had retired and I knew there's going to be a, you know, a blood bath when she left because you know, the wind was blowing that way and when they offered this and they offered a buyout, you know, I sat down and wrote the pros and cons. And I was working a heck of a lot of nights, like a lot of nights and maybe it was time. The Nina Courtepatte thing really got to me. I didn't want to do that part anymore.

NARR: Nina Courtepatte was a 13 year old girl who was found murdered on a golf course in Spruce Grove, Alberta in 2005. The emotional toll of covering the crime scene, funeral and trial left Holubitsky exhausted and pushed him to accept the buyout package from Postmedia.

Jeff Holubitsky: And so that, that's why I laughed and I spent about three months doing not much. And then my wife said, you know, you should really start looking at this you're good at that. Probably I was quite pleased to do it. It was really nice not to worry about having any deadlines or anything. It was like a relief, you know. So I applied to SEE Magazine, she told me about it. So I applied and then Todd phoned up and said, Hey, do you want to have an interview? You come on down. And I sat down and he didn't ask me one question. He talked for like an hour and a half over lunch at the Blue Plate Diner. I still remember. And at the end I said, well, what's going to happen? Like, and he said, Oh, you got the job, don't worry. So that's when I started there.

NARR: Great West Newspapers felt that Holubitsky's decades long experience on the daily news beat would be a good fit for SEE. When he started the job, he initially felt that it was best to let the editors have control of their sections despite what he considered a relatively inexperienced and ill-focused edit room.

Jeff Holubitsky: So when the first things I did is I decided that I would, we would do all layout in house and I gave the artists the responsibility to do it. I, you know, okay, you're the artist, you're the designer, you make this look good, it's on you. You know, I can't offer you money but I can offer you that. And, and, and they took up the challenge and the entertainment editor, well there was actually two to start with, but the entertainment section, I gave it to them. I, you know, you can do the fashion or you can do the entertainment, but it's on your shoulders now. No one's gonna, you know, if it screws up, it's you. But on the other hand, if it looks good, it's you. And I found the editors and all the news editors, everybody, they responded like magic to this thing.

NARR: Despite Great West's confidence in Holubitsky, the SEE staff weren't as certain in how his daily news from experience would transfer to an alt weekly. The worst case scenario being intentionally or otherwise, that the new management would try to pull the paper away from its alt weekly audience and into the mainstream. For Paul Matwychuk, the most experienced alt weekly editor in SEE's office at the time, Holubitsky's hiring, was met with doubt that there was an understanding of the differences between the values of a free alt weekly and a daily newspaper.



Paul Matwychuk: And when Jeff Holubitsky took over as the managing editor, our personalities didn't really mesh. So it didn't, it didn't feel like it was necessarily like being run by people who had kind of like a vision for the paper or what, you know, an alternative Edmonton newsweekly would be like. You know, I don't recall Jeff telling me about things that I couldn't write. I was doing the entertainment section and he was not, you know, he's like an older guy. He was like an old Journal hack. Right. And when Kevin left and they were looking for, okay, who's going to be the managing editor now? I applied for that job. I'd been managing editor at Vue. So I felt like, okay, I've got experience writing a weekly and, but they hired Jeff Holubitsky and the, the advantage he had over me as far as Todd, like Todd I think genuinely wanted SEE to be like, you know, like a real alternative paper. And he and like, and he wanted to beef up the news coverage. He wanted to get into the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies.

NARR: It was something of a sore spot for Great West. That Vue Weekly had been inducted into the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, the AAN, in 2007. SEE wouldn't gain membership until 2009. Both papers had pursued membership for years.

Paul Matwychuk: Jeff, you know, was able to convince him that he had like this, you know, daily newspaper news-gathering experience. And he was going to bring that to the paper. So yeah, fine. So Jeff became the editor and I think Jeff could tell that I didn't really like have, let's say respect for him. I felt like he, you know, didn't really put in a lot of hours and you know, kind of, and didn't really seem to know what was going on in the city and didn't really deliver much in this, you know, news department like we just were not close or anything.

NARR: Holubitsky could sense that sentiment at the SEE office. One thing that was clear to him was that there were a lot of passionate minds working for the magazine, but their goals, interests and views on editorial process were very different than his own.

Jeff Holubitsky: My biggest shock was the, the disorganization and you know, the lack of experience. I saw a lot of enthusiasm and I saw a lot of potential. I saw a lot of raw talent, very raw talent and the willingness to like work really, really hard. But I saw a lot of people spinning their wheels because they did not like focus. It kind of lacked a focus in, in many ways.

NARR: The ideological differences between the current staff and Holubitsky's vision for the paper quickly became apparent. While SEE staff would take shots at the grumpy old man columnists at mainstream papers, Holubitsky would hold up writers like former Journal columnist, Scott McKeen, as examples of if nothing else, quality writing. Since McKeen left the Journal in 2013, he's served as a city councillor for Edmonton Centre.

Jeff Holubitsky: You know, there was an attitude when I got there that the dailies kind of were old and stodgy and no one really knew what they were doing. They're just a bunch of old farts that, you know, they'd weren't. And it was like, no, sorry guys. These are people that have dedicated their lives to writing and so on. They've done it for many, many years.



You actually, you may not like what Scott McKeen writes, but don't criticize the way he writes it because you know, he can write circles around anybody here. He can, but learn from what he does, doesn't and make, you know, take your own way of showing it. You know, so I had young reporters come to me and say, how can I be good? And you know, well there's no secret. You work hard, but ultimately you have to kind of be yourself and ultimately you have to be a good person if you're writing it for all the wrong reasons, ego and so on that comes through, you know. So I tried to make it a little more professional I suppose.

NARR: As ever SEE's weekly grind went on with its staff of editors and writers, somewhat strong personalities, others keeping their heads down apart from a period of general editorial strength page counts and weekly pickup numbers were still shrinking.

Jeff Holubitsky: We did things there that broke the mold. You know, like our focus sections: print in peril, homelessness and Edmonton, the opening of the art galleries, things like that. If there was something important, we still covered it. But you know, like we didn't have to run every single movie review that week or every, we set space aside to cover a bigger issue. And I was really proud of those. I thought those did well. I thought, I think those did very well too, in the awards we got, you know, I think many of the awards including the American Alternative Newspaper award for our cover and you know, covers not just a picture. It's also what it's advertising. You know, it's the content as well. Yeah, I think, I think we had a lot of success. We won a lot of awards, the best entertainment section for a weekly in Canada. A lot of stuff happened. You know.

NARR: We should mention that most of SEE's awards and honorable mentions were one for content produced in and around 2009. Before that, no one had really considered going after editorial awards. Most weekly staffers weren't even aware of their eligibility for such things. But traditionally awards are important for journalists and they were important to Holubitsky. The Canadian newspaper awards that SEE won for best arts coverage and cover image were for periods when Paul Matwychuk was editor of SEE's arts sections, and Michael Nunweiler headed up the art department. The issue that led to the arts coverage award was Mattwychuk's final special edition covering the Edmonton Fringe. Both Nunweiler and Matwychuk would be fired before those awards were ever delivered to the SEE office.

Jeff Holubitsky: Angela Brunschot. She was great at learning. Some people resisted, didn't want to learn or hear anything I said. I knew I couldn't work with them.

NARR: Prioritizing who he felt he could work with over those whose work was well suited to an alt weekly, turned out to be something of a misstep for Holubitsky. Morale in the office turned sour, particularly when it came to one of Holubitsky's first new hires in the news department. When Angela Brunschot, SEE's then news editor, went on maternity leave. Holubitsky hired Maurice Tougas, a former liberal MLA and sometime opinion columnist for the city's North side weekly, the Edmonton Examiner to oversee SEE's news department.



Jeff Holubitsky: I knew Maurice, not personally, but I knew that I read his column in the Examiner, which he was the editor like 15 years and I would always read it cause it was free, but he was kind of funny. Humor in writers is kind of a rare thing, like somebody that actually can make you laugh. That's, that's kind of important. But it doesn't happen very often and it goes a long way. And I knew he was funny and I knew he had like all those years experience an editor and honest to God, bringing experience to that place was not a bad idea. So that's why I brought Maurice on. He was older. I wasn't going to discriminate on somebody because of age because I had felt that myself. Like, what's this old fart going to tell us to do anything ,experience can help. And that's why I brought him in.

NARR: Staffing changes kept coming at and not on the best of terms. When Paul Matwychuk got canned in December of 2009, it wasn't much of a surprise, but the reason wasn't what you might expect.

Paul Matwychuk: Jeff did eventually fire me for like a really minor thing I thought. But so there was one issue where I don't know why, but in the, in the masthead I put in like a fake name in the masthead. I said like headline writer Gags Beasley, which is like a name stolen from a Steve Martin routine. And I don't know why I think I was just like, you know, it's the kind of thing you do when you're at like a university newspaper and you just play around at the margins of the paper. And I guess I did kind of know in the back of my mind that Jeff didn't really closely look at the pages they were going into the paper. I, you know, I guess I did kind of know that he wouldn't approve of it, but it felt harmless to me and I knew he wouldn't see it and who cares. And then a couple of weeks later he calls me into the office and wants to know what's the, you know, what's this? Someone had brought it to his attention and you know, that kind of thing where like you try and like you tell a joke and the other person like doesn't perceive it as a joke or sees it in a different way. There was just like no convincing otherwise. Right. So I think Jeff saw that as me putting one over on him and he really strongly felt that, you know, you can have your fun with your funny headlines, but you know, there's certain things like the masthead, like you gotta be serious about this. And this was just like not proper and professional. I feel like that was maybe like the beginning of the end. I guess. I didn't get fired over that. I feel like that was sort of like the start of things. And I had, and I had kind of, I had been asking for a raise as well and I wasn't getting a raise and I kind of felt, you know, I felt like maybe the rain was on a little bit. But at the same time they were giving me more to do, cause they kept firing other people. And I, you know, I had been brought in to do I think like the, to edit the film and theater coverage and then they had me do music as well, you know, and I thought like, I was just, I was like, I was too big to fail. Right. They wouldn't be able to replace, I was just doing too much for the paper. I was, it was a big job, you know. Well that was wrong. They actually did. They actually did fire me and put in someone else. I did turn out to be replaceable after all, but that's the story there. So I don't know if I, I guess I would've been fired eventually because everyone eventually got fired at SEE.

Michael Nunweiler: Oh gosh. I mean, who can, I'll, I think I'll never forget Paul Matwychuk, that guy's a riot.



NARR: Michael Nunweiler was still leading SEE's art department at the time. He watched much of the turnover firsthand.

Michael Nunweiler: As much as I sort of say that laughingly, the guy had a keen eye, he would catch so many like small, small things that like the little details, you know, and, and sort of, you know, I really admire that about him.

NARR: The problems between Nunweiler and seize management were connected to the shift in the offices power dynamic with two guests managing the news department in one instance as news editor to gas bypass the editorial process that had been set in place around artwork which didn't sit right with Nunweiler.

Michael Nunweiler: Near the end there, like I said earlier, it was definitely, you know, it was, you really had to fight for like real estate for design and like just visuals in general. And then there was a certain somebody who was in charge of hiring around there that decided he would bring on one of his friends and that's all fine and good. That's cool. You want to work with people, you know, I get that. But this, this guy that came in felt it necessary, how do I try and say this without sounding like an arrogant asshole, bypass the art department when commissioning illustrations for the magazine. And so I caught wind of this and wasn't too happy and sent an email that contained a few words that I probably shouldn't have sent, and came into work the next day and was called in the office and basically let go. I think the email was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back, but because of the previous months and sort of the, I guess butting heads of our department and editorial and trying to fight for the art department and keeping interesting visuals and design in the magazines. And so it was basically like, yeah, well, let me go. And I, I was just like, I think that's probably best for everybody. And you know, it sucks at the time, but of course, it's one of those situations in life where it forces you to move on to the next phase of your life, you know?

NARR: Maurice Tougas declined to be interviewed for this podcast. Nunweiler was fired in June of 2010 despite bringing accolades to the paper, Holubitsky had removed the magazine's brain trust of experienced alt weekly staff and found it difficult to find quality replacements.

Jeff Holubitsky: What happened is as people came and went, newspapers became less and less of attractive thing for people to want to do. So sort of the level of experience and commitment and all those things was really going down. As I'd interview people at the beginning, I might get like five great candidates. Toward the end I was lucky like, well that guy probably could do it. Maybe, I don't know if that's not fair to everybody, but say one, you know, it was really obvious and by the time I got to SEE is that years later it was really obvious. People just were not seeing newspapers as a great way to go in life anymore.



NARR: Michael Hingston who had been writing for SEE under Paul Matwychuck's editorial sections, was initially keen to jump at a job posting at the magazine, until he realized there was something unusual about the whole offer.

Michael Hingston: Basically there was a job position that was put out where they were going to hire a staff writer at SEE and I worked down the street at a different company. I had a copywriting job editing job that I didn't really like and I used to come to the SEE office every week and just linger for half an hour cause I wanted to hang out in the office, I wanted to talk to the editors, I wanted to just be around the process of this paper cause I loved it. So when the staff writer job came up, I thought this is perfect. This is my way to actually get into this industry. Staff writing jobs are very rare and even at the time were hard to come by. I'm not sure we even had a staff writer before that. I think it may have been a new position. So I came in for an interview with the publisher and when I sat down, it was pretty clear early on that there was something strange going on in the process because I kept talking about how much I wanted to write and I wanted to write about arts and I wanted to do more news writing and I was trying to pitch myself as this kind of Swiss army knife as a writer. And the publisher at the times kept saying things like, yeah, you know, writing's going to be a big part of this job, but you know there's going to be some editing as well. I remember thinking, okay, like maybe pitching in from time to time. That makes sense. And I think it was on my way home, it dawned on me that they were actually hiring me for a different job, because I had heard separately, so this was when Paul was still there. There were some rumblings where I think he felt he was, his job was in under threat and he was still there. But I remember him and I had become friends by this point. I remember him saying he was, he wasn't sure what was going to happen. He was feeling nervous about it. And at some point it kind of dawned on me in this job interview, I think they're hiring Paul's replacement, but they didn't say that and they didn't advertise it that way. And so I actually went home that night and wrote the publisher an email and just said, just to clarify, you know, I'm, I would love to work here. I love SEE, but if this is actually a replace, if you are hiring a replacement for an existing staff member, I don't think I can, I wouldn't feel good about how this process is going to, I wouldn't want to, I don't think I would. I, I would like, I withdraw my name from the, from the application. And I never heard from them again. But then, you know, three weeks later, by the end of that year, Paul was gone and there was a new a new person in his chair.

NARR: At SEE, and to an extent also over at Vue, the result of losing multiple experienced editors was an increasingly revolving door. The ranks of both papers were padded out with greener talent. This was a boon for emerging writers looking to climb the ladders in the paper's offices, but also left some with a sense that things weren't the same as they used to be.

Eamon McGrath: The most troubling thing about it for me is that I'd just see the quality of what is being written by people that were around, you know, long enough ago to care about the creative aspects of music journalism and like the role they had in a, in a record release and promotion and actually like championing a band and all these things that were



really fun things to do. There's either this cynicism that's just that totally burns them out or they don't have the staff to, you know, the editorial staff to really be, be a positively critical voice in what's getting written. And it's not, I'm not blaming anybody for this, but it's like if you don't have an editor, your writing is going to suffer, you know? So a lot of the things that get written are not as good as they were when you had like three editorial levels to go through before it hit the page.

NARR:

And so it went. The magazines had a hard time attracting talent. Freelancers were increasingly jumping ship, and the hiring of less experienced editors and the sudden loss of institutional memory, was detrimental to the quality of the paper's coverage. That decrease in quality slowly became apparent to the few regular advertisers the magazines had left. Citing ideological or personality differences for the firings may have made it easier to justify layoffs because SEE needed to cut costs. The paper was getting smaller, running at 24 to 28 pages per week compared to page counts that were double that just a couple of years earlier. The dwindling ad revenue was far from unique to SEE or other outlets in Edmonton. Print media's previously stable revenue models have been totally upended by the early 2000s. Prior to that, newspapers had a few main sources of income, subscription delivery, advertising and classifieds. Alt weeklies didn't have the first one. They were free to pick up but levied hard for advertising dollars. There were earlier rumblings about the SEE change to come. Other industries like the music industry were beginning to grapple with the consequences of online reach and free access to content. In 2005 when Kijiji Canada opened up shop, their free online listings gutted the newspaper classified sections already hard hit by Craigslist, which were a major source of revenue for the print industry. This hit everyone hard, but the free weeklies were particularly vulnerable given that they didn't even have the smallest of safety nets that subscriptions offered. Other publications in the years that followed Google ads and Facebook advertising continued siphoning away crucial ad dollars from the print industry and the music industry is owned. Digital woes harm the weeklies as well. Previously record stores and labels were regular consistent advertisers. Then that once reliable stream of ads just dried up. As a result of all of this, news outlets were forced to restructure. Layoff and buyouts became a regular frequent occurrence. Between 2008 and 2018 over 250 Canadian media outlets shuttered or merged. A majority of them were community based publications. In the papers, coverage of all types fell for every two articles on Edmonton city hall in 2008, by 2017 there was only one — a 50% drop off. According to public policy forum's Mind the Gap report of September 2018, the number of articles on courts and legislatures also dropped by about 50% per addition. During this time, Gordon Nielsen recalls seeing the industry changing when he arrived at SEE back in 1995.

Gord Nielsen: We started to SEE signs with Craigslist and I mean for the larger publications, you know, in the bigger markets and particularly in the US the classifieds were we're a cash cow and Craigslist came along and that was like, you know, maybe it, maybe it seemed like overnight at the time or in retrospect, but it, it did seem like overnight bang, there goes a big pile of revenue and, and then, you know, other market factors in including primarily the marketing budget for dedicated to alternative weeklies by advertising



agencies, national advertisers in their quest to get the coveted 18 to 34 market started to dry up.

NARR: Journalism costs money and that money was drying up. The irony of the situation was that SEE and Vue had to change the tactics that were working to retain their existing advertisers, which they had already been fighting to keep from each other for 15 years. Maybe, just maybe, it was the fight that kept them going a lot longer than many expected.

Gord Nielsen: And I think it was fascinating that FFWD, which was, was our more successful of our two alt weeklies and wasn't really competing against anybody, it was an odd, there was The Stranger actually went into Calgary for a period of time and just couldn't get a leg hold. But it was interesting to me that it folded before the others and, but it was more reliant on national ad dollars. And when those started to dry up, you know, all of a sudden you just couldn't, they weren't viable at all. And that started to happen across the country. And then with the, you know, migration of advertising dollars to digital platforms, social media, you know, you can see this coming.

Murray Utas: So I would say, okay, here's my bargaining chip. I'm going to spend some money on this particular event that we do right now. How can you help me get my other stuff in there knowing that I have very limited resources. I do not have the size of budget that others would.

NARR: That's Murray Utas. He moved to Edmonton in 1999 and started working in theatre. Now he runs the Edmonton Fringe, the world's second largest fringe festival. He was around for the heyday of weeklies, when there was wiggle room to hustle for competitive ad rates by pitting the papers against each other. This allowed arts companies to be able to afford print advertising, perhaps more advertising than they would have under other circumstances. But starting around 2009, just before SEE Magazine was about to shutter, Utas began noticing a change in his ability to negotiate ad buys with the weeklies.

Murray Utas: So we want to get behind you. So what if we did this? If you were to say, let's negotiate a sponsorship from the Expanse point of Vue and say, let's get a, let's get ourselves in the logo barn. Let's you know, put that on there. And then what I could do is maybe I could take this price that would be for these other ads, and if you stepped up one step for me, I could give you this at that price. So you found that you were treated well in that way? Yes, in terms of those sort of negotiations until the weeklies were a little more in trouble. And then you could see, you could see the stress and it was, and it was like for me as, as a producer and as an artist, I was starting to get sad cause I'm like, Oh no, are we going to lose these papers because of this? And then those sort of conversations became harder to have look like. I feel like we had, we had, I feel like we had a pretty good 10 year run. Right. So I would say that I really saw it kind of breaking into the, into the later rows. And, and then losing, SEE, and then, and then my conversation became singular with Vue and there was a little less sort of boom. So.



NARR: Dark Tarnawsky, the founder and president of Bottomline Productions and Edmonton-based publicity and marketing firm recalls the stroke of good fortune the rivalry brought for local arts promoters.

Darka Tarnawsky: But we found that they were really supportive of almost everything we did. And part of that also was because we like to support them with advertising. We were always sort of on that sort of kick with our clients that if you want to get stories, you should also support the publications when you can. Whether it be in a special summer edition, if you're a festival or you know, putting some money into those publications, not so that you directly then get an article about that particular thing, but just because they need to survive as well. So we liked to sort of build those relationships and we did negotiate pretty pretty well because they were always sort of pitted against each other. Right? So if one gave us a great deal, we could always say, well, you know, we've got a little bit of a better deal with the other one and you know, so, you know, hopefully that wasn't part of their demise, but it was definitely, it was definitely a tactic for sure. But we did believe in supporting them with money too.

NARR: Negotiation with potential advertisers wasn't enough. There just simply weren't enough dollars coming in. Something had to give and no one was coming to bail out the weeklies. Internally at SEE. Nielsen saw the writing on the wall.

Gord Nielsen: You know, another fallout of a of dueling or combating of applications was that it created a false impression about what this advertising is worth. And that client base, it just began to believe that's what these ads should cost. And now that they don't have that vehicle or you know, now they're probably, they would pay twice as much if they could just have one back. There was a lot when, when publications close regardless of which market, there's a lot of, there's always this hue and cry that comes from the whatever readership there was and the community itself. And by the community, I mean the arts and the base of the community that to whatever degree relied on the papers for either editorial content or advertising vehicle. But, but I say to myself, wait, you didn't, not enough of you ponied up. And at the end of the day, if you're not going to buy ads and we're not going to get people picking it up and reading it and seeing it and coffee tables and coffee shops, then they're not going to fly. And so in a way, everybody kind of got what they deserved.

NARR: For years, both papers fought with the impression that if one paper folded, the other would instantly double its ad revenue and finally be able to manage on its own in the local market. But what's double of not very much? Here's Eamon McGrath again.

Eamon McGrath: It's just so weird looking back on that now and thinking about how dated it all seems because even, you know, when the, when the collapse of essentially when the collapse of Canadian arts media happened and all these friends of mine got fired, you know, it seemed like now, now it's, people don't even read online media. It's like it's all Instagram or it's all Twitter and you know, in like probably 18 months, it's going to be something different.



NARR: For the writers and editors that had left or been fired, it was almost a relief to leave those high pressure and unrewarding spaces. Just as their jobs and contributions were disposed of some realized that the magazines themselves were just as ephemeral. There and then gone. Week after week. Paul Matwychuk recalls the first weeks after his firing from SEE.

Paul Matwychuk: Because I was especially curious cause like I just especially like the issues immediately after you know, I just wanted to see like, wow, you know how, how are they going? I mean, it sounds, this is the egotistical way of saying it. Like, how are they going to get along without me? You know, like, what are they going to do with it? So I guess they did have somebody waiting in the wings. Why didn't I realize this? That they're not just going to fire me and then scrambled to figure out who's going to replace me. They had somebody there and, you know, I thought it was fine. It was a different, you know, like a different editorial outlook but not like, you know, something that would make you recoil in horror at what they were doing. But you know, I think I after, you know, maybe like looking at the first few issues and sort of, you know, grumble, grumble, grumble, I just kind of stopped reading it and moved on.

NARR: And from the outside of the office, the writers and artists like Eamon McGrath started to see where it was all going.

Eamon McGrath: I mean, it's, we're all human, like people fuck up, but, but my point is that as the quality starts to suffer, less and less people read it and as less and less people read it, you know, social media becomes more and more of this Goliath kind of figure and then you know, it, the spiral sort of continues and everything just keeps going to shit. Yeah. I mean, to me it was like the last nail in the coffin of an era that had already ended by the time that I was involved in it.

NARR: For many, the period of the paper's decline and the survival strategies implemented by management didn't feel good. No matter the manner of exit, these periods of the magazine left, most staff burnt out and a little bit heartbroken. To be honest, making this part of the series really sucked and not just our own recall of the tougher years of the papers, but also in rehashing those times with our interview subjects. There were a number of people who declined to be interviewed for this part, some who did great writing and ground-breaking work while they were at the magazines. For some, it still hits a nerve.

NARR: Next time on A Tale of Two Weeklies: After over a decade of bitter rivalry, the battle for the street boxes between SEE Magazine and Vue Weekly abruptly ended in 2011, but it didn't end in quite the way that anyone would have expected.

Jeff Holubitsky: So essentially I was taken out for lunch two weeks before and said, keep this quiet, but in two weeks this is what's happening.

Curtis Wright: It was an awkward, just an awkward day for sure.



Andy Cookson: We didn't need to have two full teams. Right. Obviously cuts are going to be made.

Craig Janzen: It's kind of like working with friends that just happened to Mike take your job.

Jeff Holubitsky: By the time they had the news meeting without me I just put my jacket on and I went home and I never back.

Curtis Wright: This animosity is kind of pathetic. I think the product should be as good as we can do and we put all of our egos behind us, cause we all have one role is to create good content so people read it.

Ron Garth: I didn't want to be in a position to get in the way. I guess I could've helped out from time to time but it, it's, it was his, it wasn't mine anymore.

Mike Seik: That it wasn't, I don't think the two of them competing that, that had any relation to the fact that they're no longer here. It was just the world changed.

NARR: A Tale of Two Weeklies is produced by Andrew Paul, Fawnda Mithrush, and Paul Blinov. Music is by Luke Thomson. Artwork is by Michael Nunweiler. This series was made possible with project support from the Edmonton Heritage Council. Special thanks to Edmonton Community Foundation for use of their recording studio.