



## A Tale of Two Weeklies

### Episode 7: Fin.

Paul Blinov: Is it harder to keep a child alive or an alt weekly alive circa like 2013?

Ron Garth: The realization, I guess that yeah, this is just not gonna work out. It's tragic.

Samantha Power: We should be doing a better job of understanding what's happening in online reporting and self reporting and all of the citizen journalism that was happening, which is essentially what all weeklies were born from.

Trevor Schmidt: So to be honest, and it's going to sound callous, but I was not sad to see Vue go.

Mel Priestley: So it was a toxic workplace and then there was the struggle between advertising and editorial just became so prominent.

Trent Wilkie: But there was, people were willing to pour their guts into it, to do it for very little money. They stopped caring about the writers. They stopped caring about the people who were making fuck all.

Eden Munro: Life got a lot better the day I walked out of there.

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. I'm Paul Blinov. This is A Tale of Two Weeklies.

NARR: SEE magazine's last issue was published on May 26, 2011. The end came when it was purchased and then folded into Vue Weekly, which its founder Ron Garth had sold to a new owner, Bob Doull. Doull had purchased both papers. In that moment, SEE's ending closed the seam that began with the two papers split, but the merging of the papers didn't end the financial woes. It's no spoiler at this point to remind listeners that the last issue of Vue Weekly was published in November 2018, and in its few final years its survival over SEE didn't exactly feel like a victory lap. This period was when our co-producer Paul Blinov rounded out his days at Vue. You'll hear him in the following interviews. The new singular weekly, Vue, was still scrambling to find money. Andy Cookson, who during this period would go from a sales representative at SEE to, for a time, the publisher of Vue, recalls that struggle. It was compounded by the fact that his promotion came under less than ideal circumstances.

Andy Cookson: We are in yet another kind of tense situation. We weren't sure what was going to happen. Received news that I was publisher like a week before going on paternity leave, which is always the best time. Absolutely. Now it's like the last thing you want to worry



about. And then after I got back from my paternity leave, not surprisingly moved down from publisher to back to an office manager role and then associate publisher. And I mean mostly just shuffled around kind of within those few roles until I left. So.

Paul Blinov: Is it harder to keep a child alive or an all the weekly circa, like 2013?

Andy Cookson: I kind of feel like there's a lot of similarities there. You know, there's a lot of tantruming those happening at certain points. I think I wouldn't have put in the effort that I had during my leave if I didn't care about the likelihood of the paper. I think that made a big difference and certainly I felt like I wanted to still make or do my part. I think from afar now my boundaries were probably not as set as I'd like. And I, I know I spent more time coming in the office with the crying baby on one shoulder than I think myself for probably anyone there was comfortable with. I know that those board meetings are probably excruciating when I'm trying to talk about, you know, the upcoming year of special issues while a wailing toddler's like running around the room. But what do you do? What do you do? You know, you do what you can.

NARR: In his publisher and associate publisher rolls. Cookson was dealing with pressure from all sides. Doull, Vue's new owner, was trying to bring in outside expertise to help the paper find revenue, but they didn't always seem like a good fit.

Andy Cookson: And so we ended up bringing in kind of outside consultants who each one seemingly, you know, multiple decades older than the last with the same idea of like, well, just grab a phone book and call up everybody. And I mean, that's not how you build a community of clients in terms of sales. It's not, I mean, putting all your emphasis into that, it's not how you keep or attract new readers. It's just, it seemed to be like every few or six, three to six months, there'd be another grand idea of something else that would, you know, stay the water leaking into the boat and keep us afloat a little bit longer. But each one just seemed to be further and further connected from what we were actually trying to do. When someone's telling you, well, you know, when I think my work, let's do two page spread on funeral homes in Edmonton and you're like, do, do you even know where you are? What day is it? It certainly was a trying time. So it's just, and I think in those instances just trying to listen to what their concerns were, bring that back to the powers that be to address. Often the powers that be would believe so heartedly that it was the right decision. And so the one, one item I remember was one of the people that came on board wanted to do like a stuffed bear donation, where we would get businesses to basically sponsor a stuffed bear. And then we would get, it'd be, we're not getting advertising from the advertising from them. We're only asking for the money that would be spent for advertising to donate for this bear drive. And then we'll do like a one or two page spread. And I remember probably a week's worth of office time going back and forth with this individual. But we're different layouts and, and when you're talking about how we're losing steam and every, every one of like the publications that I think we were looking up to are shuttering and we're losing a week to talk about well how can we really pull off this Teddy bear donation spread? And where we'd be much



more I think on brand with who Vue was to just find a way to donate money or find a way to like put on a gig and donate money.

**NARR:** Another one of Vue Weekly's attempts to find money involved, expanding the number of special advertorial issues and inserts. Previously there were recurring special editions of the paper with a themed feature section or insert, and each would typically be limited to one per year. These included things like a books issue or a food focused issue or a winter activity section called Snow Zone that would run during the winter season. But after the merger, those special sections started arriving more and more frequently. Vue also started making specialty printed products. They weren't part of the paper itself, but would use some of the paper's resources, its production and editorial teams, to try and garner new advertising revenue. These included printed programs for theatre productions or other venues. There was also a wine and spirits guide to be distributed free in liquor stores, but filled with both writing and advertising courtesy of Vue's staff departments. Mel Priestley, the dish section editor at Vue at the time was directly involved with the production of some of these new products.

**NARR:** So I kind of did it just as a way to make some extra bucks. And then, because I was like the main wine writer of Vue, when they came up with the idea to do the wine guides, we called them, I was sort of the natural selection for writing them. And I, at first I was like, okay, sure, you know, this is cool. It's kind of like a little chap book of wine with a bunch of ads in there, or at least that was the goal. But it was still a useful tool. I thought, you know, I was like, well, I can make something that would actually be useful for people to go into a wine store and, you know, use to navigate or just to learn for their own edification. So the first one I did was okay, I didn't mind it. The second one I did, cause I think we only did two, it felt like there was more, but we also did a coffee, one coffee and a bit of tea and that and yeah. The second wine guide they had plans to expand it and they wanted to take it to, well they did take it to Calgary and to the Okanagan. But it was basically like, just sell like the same writing copy. It was just, you know, like stick different ads in it for different places.

**NARR:** If you're this far into A Tale of Two Weeklies, you've heard frequent references to the decline of ad revenue and cost cutting measures that print media had taken on. So what were the ad targets? How much did an ad in the newspaper actually earn anyway?

**James Jarvis:** Yeah, \$2,300 for a full page. \$1,415 for a half page, \$920 for a quarter page, \$670 for a fifth page, \$500 for an eighth of a page. Do you want me to keep going?

**NARR:** This is James Jarvis. He was a sales representative of Vue Weekly from 2012 until the paper eventually folded. Previously he'd worked as a sales rep for the furniture chain Leon's and briefly in the classified section for the Edmonton journal.

**Paul Blinov:** And do you remember it was like, was there a certain size that was more popular? Maybe that's a weird question.



James Jarvis: No, I think a fifth between a fifth and a quarter were probably the size that we sold the most of. And then if people were committing to enough of them, then the price came down. And then there were some grandfather deals, you know, with some people's special specifically really in addition music, the Blackbyrds and the Sugarbowls and folks with the world that were paying a a rape that went back to the early days and it just never went up.

NARR: Jarvis is six years with Vue were unusually long for its ad department. A lot of the advertising staff had a much higher turnover rate, but he built relationships with clients and tried his best to keep the money coming in.

Paul Blinov: Yeah, I remember you. But like did you have like a cold call script? James, do you remember how you would like approach a new client for the paper?

James Jarvis: I like, I would do a bit of investigation first. It doesn't matter who they were, but somebody who's funding laying down, which guys thought it was an airline opposite of an airline. So yeah, it would be, it was important for me to understand who I was phoning, you know, unless I saw on their website that they had a, you know, a few weekly best to them and to know Golden Forks thing. Now I'll always, are you familiar with us? So there wasn't so much, it was a script. Every situation was different. But there is definitely a sort of a qualifying procedure where, you know, building rapport, finding out, you know, pains, budgets, you know, solutions and that. So there is something in any of my calls was to try to actually meet face to face, face to face cause that's the most effective cause then there's a lot more of that happens communication wise on so many other levels than a phone call, which is the next base thing. And then you know, we had people who worked for us who thought that, you know, the most efficient way to do it was just to keep just sending out emails, emails, emails, and that's the, the, that's the least effective.

NARR: Jarvis and the other sales reps could directly see the ad sales slowing down over the years. As things got worse, sales targets would be missed. And then eventually consistently missed.

James Jarvis: You know, and, and when were told specifically that this is, this is how many dollars needs to be in each issue to break even. And it's been eight weeks since we've done that.

Paul Blinov: Do you remember what some of those numbers were?

James Jarvis: I want to say that it was somewhere around 2019. Between 19 and 20. One was like, that's the bare minimum. Or like at 24, 28 page paper. That's the bare, like nobody's going up, but we're not going down. Right. And then, you know, we'd see weeks where it was \$7700, \$12,000 on and on, and then a Hot Summer Guide that you know had over \$300,000 in ads and it was less than half of that towards the end.



- NARR:** The Hot Summer Guide was Vue Weekly's biggest cash cow every year, a comprehensive month spanning listing section of summer activities, festivals and events. It generally took over time for most of the papers staff to pull it off, but raked in the cash for the paper.
- James Jarvis:** No, and it was not through lack of effort. It's just, you know, people that were there constantly, you know, arts organizations that were there and there and there and you know, we're going to try something else. No. Yeah. And then you know when that didn't work and then they come back and then like, it was like literally, if there's like three, two months before Bob says November 28th will be that. So that you know what, you're right. When you're right, you're right. Okay. And then it starts up and then boom, right? Yeah, so it was too little too late.
- NARR:** Nowadays, Jarvis co runs Eyesight Publishing, which puts many of his connections from the weekly days to use. He and Vue's former production editor Charlie Bliddscombe still produce theatre and cultural programs as well as one of Vue's marquee events, the Blue ReVue, a sex positive film festival based on the Hump Festival originated by Seattle's Pulitzer prize winning all weekly, The Stranger. And now that we're talking about sex, there was of course one stream of revenue Vue could access that other papers couldn't. Adult classified ads, escorts, party lines, and adult massage parlors. These ads could be a source of controversy for Vue as some advertisers avoided the paper precisely because of their inclusion, but they're also one of the things that set the all weeklies apart from other newspaper competitors and drivers handled those accounts for much of his time at Vue.
- Paul Blinov:** You've talked a lot about relationships in this job. Obviously it's such a big part of it. Was it different sort of in the, in the back pages, like where those relationships and those conversations different?
- James Jarvis:** They're all above board. Right. I'm fine. Nothing. It was, you know, that's like, that isn't kind of advertising that doesn't get sold in. Yeah. Yeah. They those are trickier ones and it's a very nomadic kind of here today gone tomorrow thing. So there's a lot of times they were language issues, communication issues. Based on who was talking with, with the owners and their, their cultural backgrounds. There was a lot of awful, okay you need a picture of this and that and, and cell phone people sending cell phone pictures or I need your logo, and they would take a picture of their business card with their phone. And that's the thing. And, and so the ad builds for the, for the cost of the ads. So for a \$60 a week ad or a \$30 a week ad, those ads required more resources to build than the \$1,400 half page ads. And this is the same computer that I had at Vue Weekly, the browser is just when I die and they go through that. Yeah. Because of the photos and things that I would have to look for for these ads. And then trying to find them and then we'd have to buy them. It was an area of the paper that took up a lot of my time and made me and the paper minuscule amounts of money. And it was an accounting followup nightmare of sending them to collections.



**NARR:** So while adult classifieds were a revenue source so that other papers couldn't access, they didn't make much financial impact, or at least not enough to keep the paper afloat. With a more demanding print calendar, more inserts and special sections taking the papers, talent, and fewer permanent staff in the office. Soon enough Vue's editorial sections started to diminish. Similar to what happened to see a few years earlier, managing editor Eden Munro was let go in October 2014. He'd been in discussion with ownership about transitioning out of his role, but was instead met one day in the parking lot with boxes to empty out his desk.

**Eden Munro:** At some point it was, I guess so bad. The publisher was bailing and we put out to put out an issue and then I was given some boxes and I left. And I have never opened those boxes, they're still in my basement. Yeah, just cleared out everything and walked away and started a film production company the next day and life got a lot better the day I walked out of there.

**NARR:** To save on paying freelancers much for the writing was moved in house, which also ended many local freelancers' associations with the magazine. The staff were tasked with writing much more than they previously had been responsible for. In addition to the actual editing of the weekly paper. A staff writer role was hired, but that continued to reduce the number of voices in the paper. A few months later, the remaining editors from the merger period who were, at that point, Megan Baxter, Mel Priestley and Paul Blinov left or were let go in summer of 2016. This is Paul and Mel Priestley discussing their departures.

**Mel Priestley:** I was actually thinking back to this and I, I must have just kind of blocked a lot of the, the badness that was happening as to why I left, because when I think back to Vue, I think, Oh yeah, Vue, that was fun. But at the end it was not fun and I wasn't having fun and there's a reason I left and I, I was, was quite angry with the way things were happening at the, the paper. So it was a toxic workplace and then there was the struggle between advertising and editorial just became so prominent. And the sales team had their own turnover of, of edit or not editors, but of team members because of that. Right. It's a tough gig. And yeah. So, so thinking back to what were the steps that left me or led me to leave there? Um, lots of, all of that little stuff building up, just the toxic environment. The shrinking pages, not being able to pay writers what I wanted to pay them, what they deserve to get paid to write for the paper. And just kind of like losing the heart of it, you know, losing the, the spark that kept me going for so many years. Like I started not caring as much or at all about some of the stories I was writing. And then as a writer, when you realize I'm writing something because I have to and not because I want to, it's just a job and it's not a very fun job. You just have to question why, why you're doing it. But the last straw was when they, they fired Megan, the managing editor who I, you know, I got along with Megan very well and I, we stood up for each other, I think in, in against the flack she was constantly getting from the sales team and from the publisher. So when they decided to fire her that was it. I was like, yeah, I'm done. And I left two months later.



Paul Blinov: We had a meeting. I remember you went out for a meeting as my memory recollects this from my perspective, we had booked a meeting, you, the three of us. And at that meeting, I was going to tell you too, that I was leaving at the end of that, I was going to see us through another fringe and that was going to be the end. And then when we went to that meeting, Megan was like, I'm being let go. And it was like, Oh fuck. Oh no. And then it was like, and then if you're not staying I'm not staying. You're going, I'm going. Yeah. It was very, I remember the tone of our meeting at the Underground over beers because we needed them being like, okay, we're all, yeah, that's it. Yeah. And we comprised three quarters of the editorial team at that point. Yeah. There was only a poor Jasmine, Jasmine, I'm sorry, staff writer. But we were the three editors at that point and we all left within a month of each other. Megan was let go because her job was restructured and then they hired a general editor and then I left. And you left at the same time.

Mel Priestley: That was it. It was, that was the last straw. Right. It was cause I don't think Megan deserve to get fired. It was, it was a lot of personality conflict I think. And it was, I don't know what it was. I, I won't speculate here on any more than that, but I think it was a bad decision and it was one that I did not support. So yeah.

Paul Blinov: And I remember just being like, why am I going to stick this out for another three months and stress myself out over the fucking Fringe, especially the fringe, which is the hardest part of my job every year. Do you remember how it felt to send that message, that email or that letter to be like, I'm done?

Mel Priestley: Yeah, I felt real good. Yeah. I

Paul Blinov: I remember having the thought before I pressed send, that's like, I'll never have this job again. Like a job like this again.

NARR: There was a little overlap between the departing editors in new hires. Angela Brunshot SEE's former news editor was the loan editor at the Vue office for a short time after Blinov, Priestley, and Baxter were gone. And with its full editorial cohort largely diminished, the change in Vue's outward quality was quickly apparent. Trent Willkie, who had long been a freelancer for both papers, took up an editor desk at Vue in its twilight years. It had taken him years to come back around to the weeklies after having two kids, but he came in at a point when things were already going south.

Trent Willkie: What I felt changed from when I was first reading to when I quit Vue, was there wasn't a respect for the writers anymore. With the onset of the internet, people were writing for free and they were good writers, bloggers. They were doing this stuff for free. They were reporting you had citizen journalism like you'd never had before and in this and Edmonton, there's a lot of really good journalists. I'm doing air quotes that never went to J school. Yep. No, it was a lot of shitty ones too. But you had this all of a sudden, it's like when Napster first came out. You know what I mean? You don't have to buy CDs anymore. You download whatever you want, you know, you get threshold apprehension



because you don't know what to do with. You've got all this music or you can start burning your own CDs and making your own albums and recording your own music though. That's sort of what happened. Right? So that's what sort of happened to the alt weekly world was that you had all these opinions used to have to go and read them or be a part of it. You have to go and write them and get them published somewhere for people or you did a scene. But like that's sort of what happened and this with a glut of writing of varying qualities. I was told during a writing meeting, we were having a discussion about something that happened in the newsroom. Right? This is this view. This is that view. Yeah. I was told that my opinion as a writer didn't matter. I was told that by one of my bosses and I felt this weight leave my shoulders because I finally realized what's going on. Nobody fucking cares. Nobody cares. It's a product now. It was one of those things that was put in a market that was to make money, but there was people willing to pour their guts into it, to do it for very little money and pour their hearts into it. And now that market is starting to take over by people who only see it as a thing, as a way to make money. And then at the end to just do your most important part. The most important part is always your writers. They stopped caring about it. They stopped caring about the writers. Lots of turnover. Lots of turnover. Lots of turnover. Yeah, fucking done. Yeah, and that's, that's what happened. They stopped caring about the writers. They stopped caring about the people who were making fuck all.

NARR: For Trevor Schmidt, artistic director of Northern Light theatre, the difference in know how a Vue was clear. An he started to feel that the paper wasn't worth his company's ad dollars anymore.

Trevor Schmidt: Now I feel like the last incarnation of Vue was filled with new people who knew nothing about anything. We were buying ads. We S we have been up until this last year so they they sponsored, yeah, sponsored us. There was a exchange of ads and they also gathered advertisement for our year long program. So but they certainly, we certainly didn't buy good reviews. I can tell you that much. It's not at all. So but I want to make that clear like we weren't getting, we weren't getting good reviews particularly in this last season where I just went, what are we paying these people for to hate us? If I want people to tell me I'm a terrible person, I can go home for Thanksgiving and at least I'll get a Turkey dinner.

NARR: From the publicity side, it was apparent that the weeklies were struggling for ad revenue but the inexperience of the personnel at the magazine's office was also an issue when it came to the coverage they were providing. This is Josh Semchuck of Bottom Line Productions, a local arts publicity company that was there for the beginnings and endings of both see and Vue in Edmonton.

Joshua Semchuk: The last three years of promoting arts organizations with Vue before its demise was it was very last minute. In a lot of cases it was, Oh I have some space here, can I, can I do this or pitch? But we learned we had to pitch weeks and sometimes months in advance because they had to have that kind of lead time to work up to it. On the flip side, it forced us to be as nimble as possible because if Stephan called and said, I got to



put something in you know, in three days, what do you got? Always had something for them and be able to turn it around quickly. So it forced us to be far more, I mean we were, we've always been organized, but I think it forced you to be nimble.

**NARR:** When you have a hole to fill last minute on production day, it is possible to ring up a promoter and get a story on a tight turnaround. But usually you plan ahead to save everyone, yourself included, the hassle. The decline in editorial quality, disappointed others like Schmidt and not just in terms of the nature of coverage, his own company's shows, received the loss of longstanding and trusted critical voices in the papers was for some hard to take. Back to Trevor Schmidt.

**Trevor Schmidt:** It makes me really sad. I used to pick them up all the time, used to pick them up every week and read them every week from cover to cover, they got me informed about the whole community. Then it reached the point where I only picked it up when my shows were being mentioned because I thought, I don't need to read the rest of this because there was stuff that wasn't of interest to me anymore any longer or I didn't like the way things were being covered. And in the last little while, just before the demise of Vue, I gave up entirely. So to be honest, and it's going to sound callous, but I was not sad to see Vue go. I felt that if you want to write social commentary, write it as an op ed. But don't try and coach your op-ed. It as a critique of of the theater scene and I felt that that was happening a lot.

**NARR:** For some of the freelancers, the switch and editorial staff, men established relationships and assignments were no longer guaranteed. Jose Teodoro, who wrote film criticism for Vue for more than a decade, found himself suddenly disconnected from the paper.

**Jose Teodoro:** Yeah. Well for the record, I personally did not stop writing for Vue. The editor who took over after you left just never responded to any of my messages for a variety of reasons, I was happy to continue writing, writing for Vue Weekly, you know, it was definitely the the worst paying gig I had, but there was also just the privilege of being able to write the kind of stuff that we wrote about there.

**NARR:** Still the paper had to keep coming out and it did for a long time. Vue you kept going for two more years. Stephan Boissonault became an editor during this period. Actually, he became quite a few things after starting as an intern. He became a staff writer before taking over a section of his own. Movement in the editorial department was fluid, just as another editor at the time, Lee Butler, Boissonault it would be.

**Stephan Boissonault:** And it's funny because the minute that I was hired at Vue as a staff writer by Lee, he said, things change here so quickly, you could be in one position in one day and the next day you could be out of that position or you could be in a better position. It's just, that's just the way things go with Vue. And he was right because I became the music editor. We hired a, another staff writer and she immediately became the arts editor. Her name was Sierra Bilton. Worked really, really well with her. And then we had basically a listings editor. And then yeah, it was basically just us for, for the a little bit. And then we



had Trent Willkie who was basically like an old guard at Vue and he was the news and online kind of editor. Right. And eventually a lot of people just kind of left.

**NARR:** Some considered it a bad sign when in summer of 2018 Vue announced that it would no longer run its section of free event listings, which was one of the backbones of what weeklies provide. But the paper soldiered on into the fall until on November 29th, 2018 when Vue Weekly published its final edition. It was issue number 1,205 and that was the end of the alt weeklies in Edmonton. In the end there was a brief outpouring of condolence messages for Vue's demise on social media. Here's our co-producer Andrew Paul reading some of those posts.

**Andrew Paul:** Eamon McGrath posted an image of two Vue cover stories that featured his albums along with the message "from many lifetimes ago. Thank you for everything you ever did for art and music in #Edmonton @Vue Weekly. RIP. Actor Mark Meer tweeted a Vue cover depicting him as his well-known character commander Shepard from BioWare's Mass Effect video game. Meer said "farewell to Vue Weekly. Thanks for the years for support for the Edmonton arts community and on a personal note for your help promoting my shows and projects." The BioWare cover story of Meer drew the image from was written in 2007 by Darren Zenko. Musician Doug Hoyer tweeted "farewell @Vueweekly. As a teen in a nearly pre-internet life, you are a fantastic gateway into what I considered to be Edmonton as a musician. Your support meant so much for me as a writer. Thanks for letting me keep the CDs I reviewed for real. Thank you for all you did. Freelancer Kate Black tweeted "sad to hear about Vue Weekly's closure. It opened a door for me as a baby student journalist and I am forever grateful. Thank you." The ever honest critic and former editor of both papers, Paul Matwychuk tweeted "wow, what a half-hearted shrug of a farewell. Speaking as a former editor, I am disappointed that Vue Weekly put so little effort into its final issue."

**NARR** When Vue's closure was announced in November, 2018 Bob Doull made a statement to StarMetro Edmonton noting that quote, "we decided that we would cease publication now rather than face another year of diminishing resources." Doull also told Giggcity.ca that "Vue did not fail. It's not bankrupt. Fewer people were picking it up and we had few resources to put into it. So we thought, why don't we spend our time and energy on something that's growing instead? This isn't anymore." The something that's growing. that Doull speaks of are those special sections in advertorial inserts. Things like the Hot Summer Guide and the Golden Fork Awards now live on beyond the paper as entities published by Great West Newspapers, as do the items that James Jarvis and Charlie Biddiscombe maintain with Eyesight Publishing. Among the sentiments from dozens of former staffers, editors and freelancers, there was a Bon Vue-age party a couple months later, which was sparsely attended by a handful of former contributors. Ron and Mike Garth were there, listening as city councillor Scott McKeen addressed the audience.

**Scott McKeen:** I'm a newspaper man. I worked for about 27 years in newspapers, 24 of that was at the Edmonton Journal, and I loved working on newspapers. And I think newspapers are



critical to community to not only reflect itself, to reflect the community back in itself, to lead opinion, to reveal hidden gems like we're in tonight. It's critical and Vue Weekly was an integral part of this community for years and it is a tragic loss. And I know this nobody wants to be bummed out tonight, but I really do miss it. And all of you who worked for Vue Weekly I can say that I deeply appreciated the work you did week in, week out. I remember when I was in St. Albert Gazette, which was a weekly, so my basket memories where we would put the paper to bed on a Monday night we'd head to the Bruin Inn,, and drink til really late and that had to get up and started all over again the next week. And it was one of the best feelings of any yet in the next day, crack open, get to see that newspaper, that product that you put blood, sweat and tears into. I miss you all and the work you did, I wish you all the best.

**NARR:** So what did Edmonton lose with the closure of those printed all weeklies? Among other things, one loss that many of our interview subjects felt was that of trusted voices offering regular reliable discourse on what was happening in the community, and a physical format that would lead you to those voices without an algorithm filtering things for you. Here's Jose Teodoro again.

**Jose Teodoro:** I don't want to sound like a grumpy old man, but I do think that the experience of picking up a tabloid size newspaper and being able to flip through is an opportunity for surprise. It's an opportunity to read things that you probably will never read if you're just looking at like the, the main page of the website, of a newspaper or a magazine. I think the quality of the experience is just inherently different and it may have been as important in the experience of reading an alternative weekly as it does continue to be in terms of reading a daily newspaper. You know, how do you sit down and feel like something of the outside world is getting funneled to your eyeballs? And there's also the whole curational aspect of that. You know, like how is a managing editor or the editor of a particular section going to make decisions about what you need to read that you can't get in the dailies or that you're not getting on television or that you're not getting by looking at social media. It's just one more avenue that seems to be eroding more and more.

**NARR:** In his Edmonton Journal column after the closure of Vue, Fish Girwowsky said, "what especially gets me about the loss of the space occupying arts weekly is a thing I still very much covet about any print media: that page turning sense of magazine browsing, which inevitably leads to encountering information you're not specifically looking for from which you might accidentally learn something. It's the difference between a good bookstore or library and amazon.com." A bit further back while she was working at CJSR and Vue, Samantha Power reflected on the history of alt weeklies and their contemporary trajectory and a university paper titled "A changing space for radical thought: Challenges to traditional models of alternative news."

**Samantha Power:** So I looked at the history of all weeklies in a lot of it was really inspiring. Of course, like alt weeklies started essentially that a voice for the voiceless. There's specific points in history that people point to like the Watts riots in 1965 where I think it was LA



Weekly was sort of the only paper to actually send a reporter out and report on those riots and actually talk about the communities involved and provide some sort of profile to what was happening at the time. That type of reporting I think has always been at the heart of alt weeklies is to actually be where people are and understand marginalized communities. So that was a really inspiring part of writing this paper on alt weeklies. It seemed antithetical to what alt weeklies were, that we weren't adapting to the grassroots nature of the internet at this, at the same pace. Like it felt because of that history and responsiveness, we should be doing a better job of understanding what's happening in online reporting and self-reporting and all of the citizen journalism that was happening, which is essentially what alt weeklies were born from. But we almost fell into the same traps as mainstream media and just sort of almost became more protective of what the alt weeklies were as what I sort of found. So that was, that was disappointing.

**NARR:** The weeklies were also an important platform for emerging students coming out of journalism school. Here's Neil Fitzpatrick of McEwan University's Journalism program.

**Neil Fitzpatrick:** Yeah, I mean, I'll admit a Vue Weekly, especially cause, SEE Magazine was, it was sort of prior to my time here, but Vue Weekly was a great, avenue for taking our students for their placements, not only for their field placements, but often students who, were freelance writing, had an opportunity with Vue Weekly. So, when it went under a, it left says some of our, our existing students and alerts because they were freelancing for Vue. And it also left a big dent in, in my, my opportunities to find placements, especially in that arts and culture area was extremely important because we can teach them all the basics here and the, and the what they can expect. But it's not until they end up working at a, let's say, you know, the Cold Lake newspaper or, the newspaper and with task one where they're actually, they have their feet on the ground and they're out interviewing people and, and meeting deadlines on a daily basis sometimes. So it's extremely important that they learn those skills and to be able to go to a smaller publication or a smaller website or a smaller newspaper and as you said, get the crap beat out of your writing and have a, somebody who's been in the business for a while say, no, you can't do that for this story. You can't do that for this interview. These are the questions you should have asked. You know, you're making typos in your story. You got to catch those in the proof. All those things are so essential. So when there's fewer opportunities to learn that it makes it that much more challenging, I think, for the journalism graduates to actually enter the field. They're not having anybody correct their mistakes, so they're liable to continue making those mistakes.

**NARR:** Today there are plenty of options to find events and local information, though, most of them online. The majority of musicians, artists and arts companies use the big pre-existing social media channels, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram to promote their work, but that changes the discourse around those events. In a paper that's independent of the artists involved, there's outside perspective and a trust that can come with that. Not always. Of course, papers routinely got details wrong and misspelled names among other errors, but there remains a different sort of credibility that arrives when someone



who isn't yourself or a fellow artist talks about your work. After Vue Weekly stopped printing, Boissonault and the remaining Vue editorial team started up Daze, an online publication focusing on local arts and culture. They've been paying the bills by throwing fundraising events and Boissonault notes "are looking to focus on a quality first approach even if that means less frequent event based coverage."

Stephan Boissonault: We're trying to go away from event based stuff now because event based stuff like you need to publish like, you know, if there's a band coming you need to publish at least three days before the bands there. You know, something like that. I really wanted to start doing profiles just on like people in Edmonton; that doesn't have a time frame. Like we could just release it whenever and make it as strong as we possibly can. I had one of our writers, Alex Roshan write this story on Polar Park Brewing company about them being a new venue and a new brewery. And it took them like an upwards of like a month to write it because there was a lot of different facets and I said, we can publish this whenever you have all the time in the world. Give me your best piece or nothing at all. And he did.

NARR: Daze joins at another online, locally focused publication. Back in 2011, Mike Ross started gig city.ca, an online news and entertainment magazine focusing on local music. Gig City was the one to pick up these local comic strips after the fallout of Vue, and now covers a variety of arts topics. Liz Nicholls has her theater blog, 12thnight.ca, and there are emerging media models like Taproot Edmonton that involve subscribership or patron type investments. Calgary has something called The Sprawl, which focuses on online pop-up journalism that goes deep rather than wide, and it's crowdfunded and ad free. All of which to say there are some folks out there plugging away trying to cover things locally and some are doing it pretty well, but few, if any, are getting paid very much. If anything at all. The paycheck from a weekly wasn't always much, but it was something, and for many involved, something consistent which can be rare in the freelance world. There are still a few print alt weeklies out there in Canada. The Georgia Strait in Vancouver and Halifax's The Coast are still running, as is NOW Magazine in Toronto. The latter though is currently going through a major change in ownership. As we were putting together the final strokes of our weeklies story, on December 2nd, 2019 CBC reported that MediaCentral agreed to buy Toronto's NOW Magazine for \$2 million in "the first step of a plan to consolidate the alternative publication landscape." While there are no immediate plans to change the now brand or editorial team, plans are underway to add new content categories and integrate now with CannCentral, Media Central's cannabis focused online magazine. NOW Magazine, co-founder Alice Klein said in a letter to NOW readers that "it's an exciting time for the magazine to enter the next stage of its evolution." CBC also reported that in NOW's most recent fiscal year, the magazine suffered a net loss of over \$800,000 on revenues of just over 4 million. MediaCentral. Only other property, CannCentral, that's with two Ns in Cann, focuses on cannabis lifestyle coverage. And perhaps that's where this is all going, at least in Canada: to pot. There was a time when the weeklies and a good chunk of the arts sector were buffered significantly by alcohol and cigarette advertising, until the legality around that changed. In a way, it's not a far cry from the backpage ads SEE and Vue used to run, but



now that cannabis is legal, perhaps the advertising revenue of a brand new industry can plug some of the holes facing media. Or maybe it can't. We'll see.

**NARR:** As we bring this tale to a close, it seems fitting to circle back around to Ron Garth. He wasn't there for the last years of the paper, but his name was forever in the masthead as Vue's founding publisher. He's the reason Edmonton had two papers for as long as it did. Like some anti-hero from my gritty television show, his methods were unorthodox, but he always managed to get the paper out the door. Under him, Vue, took bold, progressive stances on topics like LGBTQ issues long before the mainstream realized that diversity was kind of a big deal, including the running of a long-standing column called Queermonton that offered many marginalized voices a public platform. Garth tried to look to the future pushing towards video content as the world started to plug in more and more. And most of all, he kept the paper coming out until the only way to do that was to let go of the reins and pass it off to someone else. He also pissed people off. A lot of people. In an earlier episode of this podcast, we referred to Ron Garth as a tenacious idealist, and indeed our interview subjects called Ron a great many other things over the course of this series. Here's what some of them said.

**Samantha Power:** Ron was the type of guy who you felt the history of alt weeklies just like coursing through his veins. It was like the physical manifestation of what alt weeklies were.

**David Berry:** Ron Garth should be properly regarded as a legend of Edmonton.

**Darka Tarnawsky:** Such a passionate guy about the arts and about the publications. I tried to stay out of the politics of it. I wasn't really interested in that. Although anytime I'd see Ron at an event, I would hear all about it.

**Paul Matwychuk:** You know, Ron was, you know, for all of his talk about how in you know the newsrooms where Conrad Black controls the paper, people are afraid to write about certain things and he skews things a certain way. Well, the only times I've really encountered like, you know, a publisher who told me not to write something or not to write a story was when I was working for Vue under Ron Garth.

**Eden Munro:** He cared and he made a difference in the city's media landscape. People all over knew Ron Garth and believed in what he was doing. He saw that the future was coming. We tried to adjust. It was difficult. He always edited the people. He felt like you get the right people and then you don't hold them back when they're excited. He said that to me one time where he was like, you guys want to build a studio? Let's do it. When people are excited about doing something, you don't tell them don't do that. You use that enthusiasm and you make great things. I would I would have stayed there forever if Ron Garth had been there.

**David Berry:** It takes something to be like a, like a yoga addicted, ponytailed, serial arts promoter-publisher and, and he is just like uniquely and entirely himself and only ever will be and



like it be a deep, deep shame if Edmonton kind of forgets his legacy and what he did over the course of like 25 to 30 years.

NARR: As the Tyee's founding editor, David Beers has often been quoted "a diverse news media is essential to a thriving democracy." Traditional journalism is struggling in a time when it's more important than ever to build community and speak truth to power. Two things that alt weeklies expressly attempted to do to David Berry that we had two weeklies in a city like Edmonton was a boon for everyone involved.

David Berry: I would mostly just say it, but like I think everywhere is poor for the lack of the alt weekly spirit. And as much as there was fights between them and like weird little rivalries and mistakes and all sorts of weird bad things, Edmonton was incredibly blessed to have two whole papers. Who is more or less organizing principle was to like cover the arts and a different sort of politics and try to provide that sense of community for it. And I hope, I really hope that the mess of new things we have now can find some way to replicate that spirit, if not the actual tangible thing.

NARR: Now at 74, with his newspaper days along behind him, Garth can see that some of his ideals, however tenacious, remain relevant.

Ron Garth: I, like I say, I had made my peace with it before when I had my meeting with everybody, and I was fine from that point on. And of course it was, it just got harder and harder for newspapers in general. But, but it's just the, the realization I guess that they, yeah. This is just not gonna work out, not just for, for the paper. The large picture is that for journalism is for the whole nine yards. This is, it's tragic. This whole populist era is More frightening than, than sad for me. It's of course nostalgic. You know what we did the work that we did and you just carry on. That just just has to happen. So, and it will, it will cause I think that we can't survive without those things.

NARR: So as our fair weeklies in their turbulent rivalry have gone to their final rest, we as writers, as a community, look forward to what's next. To the dream of a far, far better thing that may take their place. Someday.

NARR: Thanks for listening to A Tale of Two Weeklies and thanks to the people who helped us put this together: Colleen Feehan, Michael Nunweiler, Luke Thomson, Jolene Ballendine. And the people we interviewed for this podcast. David Berry, Dave Bidini, Bryan Birtles, Stefan Boissonault, Chelsea Boos, Rich Cairney, Andy Cookson, Neil Fitzpatrick, Ron Garth, Mike Garth, Fish Griwkowsky, Michael Hingston, Jeff Holubitsky, Duff Jamison, Craig Janzen, James Jarvis, Gene Kosowan, Scott Lingley, Paul Matwychuk, Gags Beasley, Eamon McGrath, Scott McKeen, Eden Munro, Gordon Nielsen, Pete Nguyen, Glenn, Liz Nicholls, Rollie Pemberton, Samantha Power, Mel Priestley, Mike Ross, Steve Sandor, Marie Sasano, Trevor Schmidt, Mike Siek, Joshua Semchuk, Darka Tarnowsky, Vern



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