

by Shane McCune

Legendary U.S. reporter and newspaper critic A.J. Liebling once called the press “the weak slat under the bed of democracy.” In 21st-century Canada, it’s more like the quicksand under the house.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU’RE NOT READING?

If you disagree with that view, just try finding any mention of **Marc Edge’s Asper Nation: Canada’s Most Dangerous Media Company** (New Star \$21) in any of the news outlets controlled by CanWest Global Communications.

Like **Conrad Black** before them, CanWest chiefs **Leonard** and **David Asper** are fond of saying they can’t control what Canadians think. But they do like to control what we think about — or what we don’t think about.

“It’s not just what you see in the paper,” as former *Montreal Gazette* publisher **Michael Goldbloom** has put it, “but what you don’t see.”

By some estimates CanWest Global dispenses up to 70 per cent of the news consumed on the West Coast on any given day.

The Winnipeg-based Aspers own both of metro Vancouver’s dailies, most of its “community” papers and the province’s top-rated TV channel, along with dailies in Victoria and Nanaimo, several more small papers on Vancouver Island and Victoria’s “CH” television.

From Victoria to Montreal it owns 11 major dailies (including five of the top 10 in circulation) and boasts that its TV broadcasts reach 94 per cent of the nation.

Lack of coverage for *Asper Nation* within the Asper Nation is to be expected—and it likely does not emanate from a diktat from head office. As Edge makes clear, the worst part of the censorship within CanWest is that most of it is now self-inflicted.

“I began to censor myself,” said **Stephen Kimber**, a fellow journalism professor and long-time columnist for the *Halifax Daily News*. He told the *Washington Post*. “I would remember, ‘No, I’m not supposed to write about that.’”

Kimber quit after writing a column he knew would be spiked. It criticized the Asper’s brief, clumsy 2001 experiment with “national” editorials written in Winnipeg and reprinted in all chain papers except the *Province* (presumably because identical editorials in both Vancouver dailies would make the cookie-cutter nature

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From Southam to Black to Asper, Marc Edge exposes the emergence of convergence

of the enterprise too blatant). Once the Aspers’ head office had taken a stand, no paper was allowed to run an editorial opposing it.

This seemed to contradict CanWest’s position as set out in its brief to the government’s Heritage Committee on Dec. 10, 2001: “Each (of our newspapers) is relentlessly local in its coverage and fiercely independent in its editorial policy.”

A month later CanWest founder **Israel “Izzy” Asper** was singing a different tune:

“As publisher-in-chief, we are responsible for every single word which appears in the papers we own, and therefore on national and international key issues, we should have one, not 14 official editorial positions.”

At the time of the furor CanWest was still using the Southam family name for the chain; its stylized torch logo appeared on each editorial. Edge notes: “The Southam ‘brand,’ which had been bought by CanWest from **Conrad Black**, stood for quality journalism. Just as importantly, it stood for local independence for publishers. Southam head office had historically taken pains to allow its newspapers to reflect the temper of their communities, even if that meant disagreeing with ownership.”

AS ONE WHO WORKED for the chain under three owners, I’d say that’s an overly rosy depiction of that stodgy operation. [Full disclosure clause: I have known Edge for 30 years; we both worked

for Southam papers in Calgary and Vancouver.] Then again, each owner that followed made the one before look better.

In retrospect the Southams’ paternalism seemed generous compared with Black’s condescension. Now the hacks gather at bars and say, “At least Black spent money on newsrooms instead of starving them like this bunch.” (In fact, Black did spend on the *National Post*, but other newsrooms were squeezed to help pay for it.)

The HQ editorials provoked outrage, especially at the *Montreal Gazette*, where reporters retaliated by withholding their bylines. That may sound like a harmless gesture, but it infuriated the Aspers, who retaliated by threatening suspensions. The staff escalated the battle through leaks to other media and a website called, provocatively enough, the “Gazette Intifada.”

Digging in his heels, David Asper famously borrowed a lyric from R.E.M. in a December 2001 speech: “I can say to our critics, and especially to the bleeding hearts of the journalist community, that it’s the end of the world as they know it, and I feel fine.”

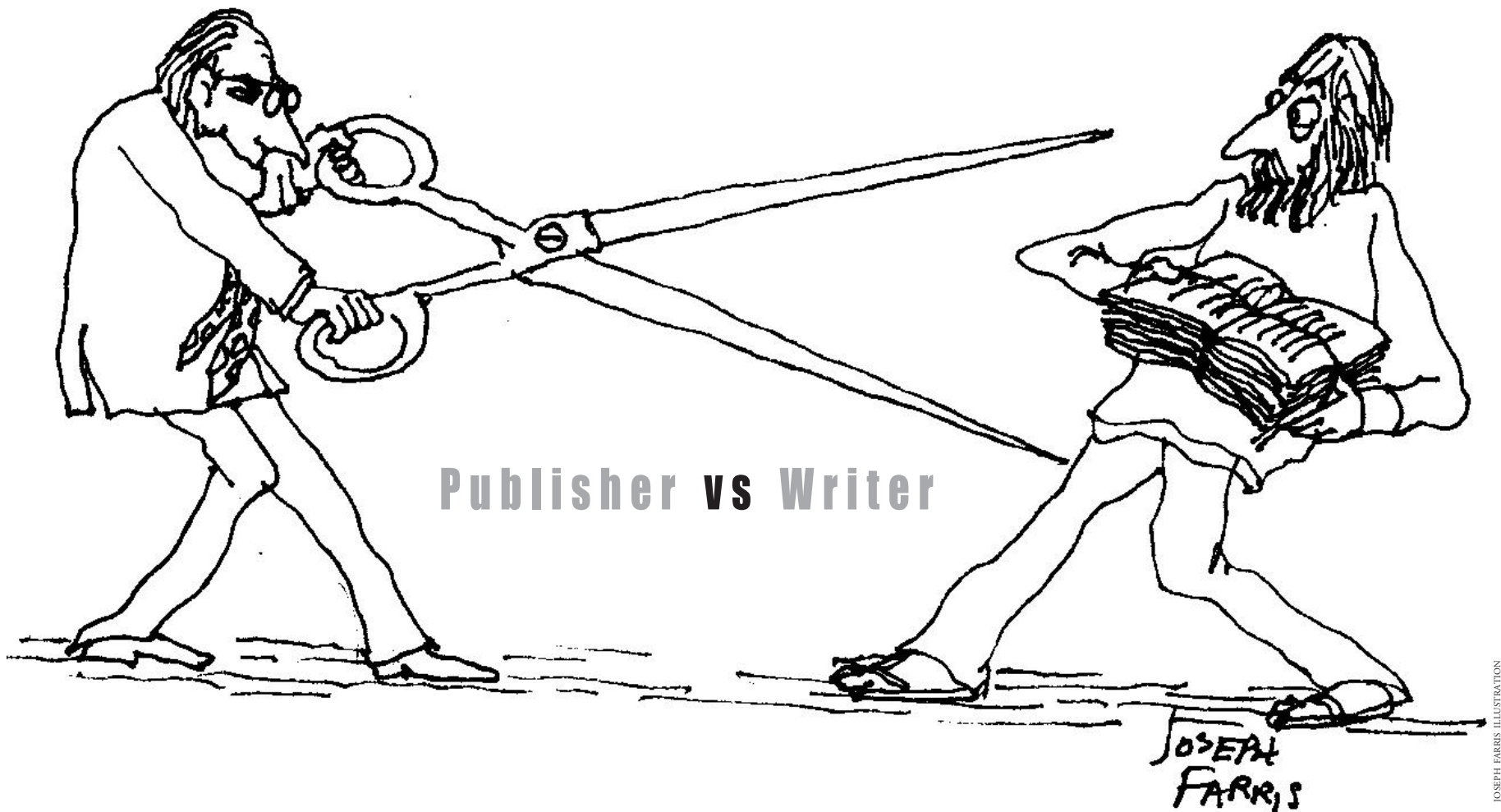
In *Asper Nation*, Edge recounts a less-publicized part of that speech that spoke eloquently of the younger Aspers’ mindset: “If those people in Montreal are so committed, why don’t they just quit and have the courage of their convictions? Maybe they should go out and, for the first time in their lives, take a risk, put their money where their mouth is, and start their own newspaper.”

A sneering rich kid who inherited his newspapers challenging wage-earners to start their own . . . well, that’s one way to inspire your employees, I guess. But he could hardly challenge them to quit CanWest and work elsewhere, because there’s not much elsewhere left.

According to Marc Edge, that was the whole point of the Aspers’ buying spree: Eliminating competition. Controlling editorial pages is all well and good, but it’s the ad revenues that count. Leonard Asper, Edge writes, was passionate about “convergence” — using the newspapers and TV network to promote each other and the web to promote both.

Convergence was a buzzword in media circles for a few years, but it has yet to live up to the hype. Maybe that’s because the Aspers, who made their millions in broadcasting, didn’t know much about the newspaper business they spent \$3.2 billion to acquire. Here’s Leonard in a 2001 speech: “In the future, journalists

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will wake up, write a story for the web, write a column, take their cameras, cover an event and do a report for TV and file a video clip for the web.”

Really? And what will they do after lunch?

EDGE MAKES IT CLEAR THE brothers inherited their belligerence from their father, a tax lawyer, politician, entrepreneur and jazz dabbler who died in 2003. As Edge tells it, Asper père sued pretty much every partner he ever had and was still pursuing a libel action against a critic at the time of his death.

Though once leader of the Manitoba Liberal party, he was a fiscal conservative whose views on most things — except his buddy **Jean Chrétien** — dovetailed neatly with those of Conrad Black.

A couple of early chapters in *Asper Nation* are devoted to Black. Much of this is necessary to set the Asper empire in context, but Edge dwells on him perhaps a little too much. Do we really need to know about his lordship's connection with the shadowy Bilderberg Group?

Some of the most dispiriting passages in the book are those showing how funding from CanWest and other big media has compromised journalism schools.

In 2000, when CanWest bought Southam, **Donna Logan**, the founding director of UBC's Sing Tao School of Journalism, said of convergence: “The danger would be that you have one very powerful editor who is making all of the decisions and you have fewer people making the decisions, fewer people making the choices of the stories that get covered.”

By the next year, the *Sing Tao* newspaper had withdrawn its funding of the school and Logan had a much cheerier attitude about convergence. Testifying at CRTC hearings into CanWest's licence renewal she said: “Converged journalism offers an opportunity to ... [free] up reporters to do stories that are not being done and are vital to democratic discourse.”

Two months later CanWest donated \$500,000 to the school. (And here Edge can't resist a cheap shot at Logan's successor, who criticized his last book, *Pacific Press*.)

More depressing still is the litany of feckless government efforts to rein in media concentration, from the Davey Commission of 1970 to the CRTC's September 2007 hearings on convergence.

How effective were the latter? In December the regulator approved CanWest's takeover — with U.S. money — of Alliance Atlantis Communications, which holds Canadian rights to 13 cable channels including BBC Canada, History Television and Showcase.

Yet Edge concludes that the best hope for undoing the “Asper disaster” would be CRTC regulations limiting media owners to a 50-per-cent audience/readership share in any market.

I'm not so sanguine about the regulator's grasp of the problem. In 2001 it allowed CanWest and BCE Enterprises (owner of CTV and the *Globe and Mail*) to merge their print and broadcast news operations, using one reporter to cover stories for both ... provided each medium kept a separate editor. Which is a little like saying a town can get by with only one wholesale bakery so long as there are two retail bread shops. No matter how each of them slices it, it's still the same bread.

CanWest quietly abandoned the centralized editorials in 2003, but they have been accelerating centralized news handling. More news articles and entertainment reviews are boilerplate generated in one newsroom and printed chain-wide. Entire pages of western papers are being laid out at the *Hamilton Spectator*.

Meanwhile layoffs and buyouts proceed apace; some newspapers have half the editorial staff they had 15 or 20 years ago. Not surprisingly, readership is headed that way, too. As Edge readily concedes, events keep overtaking his research, and not for the better.

Still, *Asper Nation* is the best guide available to the machinations and missteps that brought Canadian me-

dia to its banana-republic condition. It contains little in the way of original research — no new studies and few if any fresh interviews — but is a thorough and concise compendium of relevant information and quotation, as the voluminous notes attest. (Note to New Star: that welter of information deserves a better index.)

EDGE'S PROSE HAS A tabloid momentum to it. He's at his best cutting to the chase but a little wobbly when he wanders into metaphor (“... the proverbial straw that would catapult the CanWest controversy onto the national stage.”)

Like many of us baby-boomers who have left the newspaper business in disgust, Edge has little to say about online news beyond noting that CanWest wants to monopolize that, too.

It's true that so far there's little to recommend the “citizen journalists” touted by net geeks as the replacement for dead-tree technology and hierarchi-

cal news organizations. If you find an actual news story among the ill-informed bloviating online, chances are it originally came from one of those dinosaurs of “old media.” Newsgathering takes skill and money, and so far no one has found a way to make news websites pay.

But there are worthwhile online news sources such as the *Tjee* (thetyee.ca) and e-book technology is improving all the time. If you can download a digital book for a fee every month, why not a digital newspaper for a fee every day? With no need for expensive presses, independent news groups might rise again.

978-1-55420-032-0

Shane McCune “took the buyout” from *The Province*. He now lives in Comox as an independent journalist.

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