

Journalism Education in Canada:

Toward a Corporate Model?

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ABSTRACT

Journalism education in Canada lags far behind the field in the U.S., both in history and numbers. The first university-level schools of journalism in Canada did not open until the late 1940s, and until the mid-1970s there were only three four-year journalism schools there, all in the dominant province of Ontario. University teaching of the subject did not reach Canada's west coast until the late 1990s, despite the promise of a graduate school there dating to 1980. Two major reasons for this belated development have been practitioner resistance and a lack of government funding. Despite this, the number of university journalism programs in Canada has seen a recent upturn. Increased corporate funding, which has led to a rise in the number of programs, has also raised concern for the independence of scholarly media criticism, however, as some journalism school directors have been seen as advocating in the interests of their corporate benefactors.

Introduction

Journalism education at the university level in Canada is not as mature a field as it is in the United States, where instruction in the subject has progressed through several stages of development over almost a century. (Sloan, 1990: 10) The same pattern of development has started to be seen in Canada, according to one study, but when compared with the U.S. “each stage seems to have come roughly a half-century later.” (Johansen , *et. al*, 2001: 473) As a result of a shift in emphasis from the teaching of skills and technique to the offering of more advanced, conceptual coursework in U.S. journalism schools, some scholars see journalism itself moving from craft status to profession there, unlike in other countries where teaching of the subject is “still in the stage of transition from trade school to academic institution.” (Spichal & Sparks, 1994: 40) Journalism education in Canada lags behind in its development, obviously fitting the latter pattern. A recent upsurge in four-year journalism programs has been seen since the late 1990s in the westernmost province of British Columbia, however, with the conversion there of several former two-year community colleges into University Colleges empowered to grant Bachelor’s degrees. (Edge, 2003: 10)

In the U.S., there were at last count 458 four-year journalism schools, some of which have been operating since the early years of the 20th century. (Becker, *et. al.*, 2002: 186) In Canada, journalism schools at the university level are strictly a post-WWII phenomenon, and until the mid-1970s there were only three full-fledged programs in the subject, all located in the dominant province of Ontario. Even into the third millennium, while journalism education had finally spread from coast to coast in Canada, the number of university programs in the subject could still be counted on the fingers of two hands. (Johansen , *et. al*, 2001: 470) This paper examines the state of university journalism education in Canada, looks at how it has affected the development of media criticism and

journalism as a profession there, and ponders implications for the future of this subject in higher education north of the border.

Industry antagonism

At latest count universities and colleges in the U.S. enrolled 171,941 undergraduates and 10,241 graduate students in journalism and mass communication, annually awarding more than 38,000 Bachelor's and more than 3,000 graduate degrees. (Becker, *et. al.*, 2002: 191) In Canada, journalism has traditionally eschewed the university tradition in favor of on-the-job training or, at best, the British craft-school approach to education in the subject at two-year colleges. As a result, Canadian schools of journalism at the university level number only in the single digits and in 2001 awarded only 339 undergraduate degrees and another 66 Master's degrees. (Johansen, *et. al.*, 2001: 470) As most Canadian journalism schools have been in operation for less than 30 years, there is not a critical mass of journalism school graduates built up there, and most working journalists, who entered the business through the traditional apprenticeship system, are opposed to the very concept of journalism education. Some senior editors do not hesitate to make known their contempt for journalism schools, as former *National Post* editor Ken Whyte did after hiring 135 journalists for the start-up daily in 1998. "Given a choice of two people with more or less equal experience, we would choose the person who hasn't gone to journalism school," declared Whyte. "Journalism schools leave people with a narrow appreciation of the craft and a hard-and-fast idea of what it takes to be a journalist." (Fulford, 1998) Former *Saturday Night* magazine editor John Fraser was even more scathing in his criticism in 1994 when he blamed most of the ills of Canadian journalism on J-schools that "foster institutional rancour and disbelieving zealotry" in their graduates. "I tried to avoid them, unless they could prove to me that they had repented of nearly everything they had been taught." (Fraser, 1994) Some of

Canada's most prominent columnists have also expressed their disdain for journalism education in no uncertain terms.

- Robert Fulford: "A highly dubious enterprise. . . . an embarrassment to many who teach it and some who study it." (Fulford, 2002)
- Barbara Amiel: "I suspect the good people are good 'in spite of' not 'because of' their journalism studies." (Amiel, 1998)
- Allan Fotheringham: "You can't teach journalism, any more than you can teach sex. You're either good at it or you're not." (Fotheringham, 1988)

The academic voice is sometimes heard in response, but only from the margins, while "journalism professor" is used as an epithet by industry advocates in countering scholarly calls for media reform. This antipathy, coupled with the paucity of media scholarship resulting from the underdevelopment of journalism education in Canada, has led to a disparity in media criticism, with academics outnumbered and marginalized to a significant degree. "The academic tradition in the United States . . . produces a relatively abundant flow of writing about news media," noted Peter Desbarats while he was dean of the graduate school of journalism at the University of Western Ontario. "By contrast, public debate about journalism in Canada suffers from a constant shortage of historical perspective and reliable data." (Desbarats, 1989)

Columbia of the North

The professional voice dominates the skills vs. theory debate in journalism education in Canada in large part because the journalism school tradition has much less to sustain it in there than in the U.S. Unlike Missouri and Columbia, which were founded in the early 1900s, the first university journalism schools north of the border didn't open their doors until after WWII. The model that was followed at all three of the original post-war journalism schools in Canada – Ryerson, Western Ontario, and Carleton –was the program at Columbia, according to Desbarats. (1996: 229) Western Ontario's

journalism school even followed Columbia's move from an undergraduate offering to a Master's program in 1974, although requiring three semesters to complete the degree instead of only two. UWO was also the first to depart from the Columbia model, supplementing skills training with courses in ethics, history, law, and theory, according to Desbarats, who was dean of the journalism school there from 1981 until 1997.

(Desbarats, 1996: 231) But the Western Ontario program almost fell victim to university-wide cost-cutting in 1993 and was only saved by a last-minute appeal, after which the university's board of governors narrowly overturned a decision by the university senate to close the journalism school. (Lewington, 1993) However, the UWO graduate program in journalism, which now admits only about 50 students annually, suffered a loss of identity in 1994 when it was merged with a much larger program in library sciences into a new Faculty of Information and Media Studies. (Cornies, 2000)

The journalism program at Carleton University in the nation's capital of Ottawa is not only generally regarded as the leading J-school in Canada, but perhaps not coincidentally it is also the one that has moved farthest from the original Columbia ideal, according to Desbarats. Carleton's journalism school, which enrolls approximately 500 undergraduates and several dozen graduate students, is also unique in Canada for including a considerable mass communication component. An undergraduate program in communication studies was added in 1977 to supplement the journalism stream, a Master's program commenced in 1991, and since 1997 Carleton has also offered a Ph.D. program in the subject. (Siegel, *et. al.*, 61) According to Desbarats, this comprehensive scope makes Carleton's journalism school "closer than any other Canadian school to the type of institution now prevalent in the United States." (Desbarats, 1996: 233)

The only one of the original three post-war Canadian journalism schools that has stuck doggedly to the Columbia ideal is the one at Ryerson, which emulates its prototype

program in many ways, not least for its position in the center of the country's media capital, Toronto. From its origins in 1948 in the Ryerson Institute of Technology and an orientation toward printing instruction in Graphic Arts, within a decade the program had re-oriented itself almost exclusively toward journalism, according to Kesterton. (1984: 165) Since Ryerson became a degree-granting institution in 1972, the report of the Royal Commission on Newspapers observed in 1981, a prejudice against its graduates "that they were merely uncultured technicians, has disappeared." (Canada, 1981: 155) But even since Ryerson graduated in 2001 from polytechnic to full research university status, its journalism school, which enrolls about 550 students a year, has retained a relentlessly vocational approach. Its curriculum is almost exclusively devoted to skills training, except for courses on such standard subjects as Media Law and Ethics, and a couple of laudable offerings titled Covering Diversity and Newsroom Leadership. As such it is ripe for reform similar to that instigated recently at its model program by Columbia's new president, Lee Bollinger.

The School of Corporate Journalism

The stunted growth of university journalism schools in English Canada did not extend beyond the borders of Ontario until the mid-1970s, when Concordia University in Montreal began offering a degree in the subject in the province of Quebec. By the end of that decade, four-year journalism schools had opened both on Canada's east coast, at the University of King's College in Halifax, and in western Canada, at the University of Regina. But despite a promise dating from 1980 of a graduate school of journalism at the University of British Columbia, higher education in the subject did not reach the west coast until 1998. The reason for the delay demonstrates the major problem besetting journalism schools in Canada – a lack of funding – and subsequent events illustrate the perils of seeking that funding from questionable sources. The sorry state of journalism

education in B.C. had long been a subject of derision, as for many years the only courses offered there were in two-year diploma programs, in print journalism at Vancouver City College (now Langara College), and in broadcast journalism at the B.C. Institute of Technology in suburban Vancouver. The co-chair of a 1990 industry task force commissioned to study B.C.'s system of journalism education called it "something more than a horror story." (Odam, 1990)

The Royal Commission on Newspapers was premature by 15 years when its report mentioned that journalism education in Canada would soon be enhanced with the opening of a school at UBC in 1983. (Canada, 1981: 153) Due to federal funding cutbacks in higher education instituted during the recession of the early 1980s, private funding was the only way to get a school of journalism off the ground at UBC. When the identity of its mysterious benefactor was finally announced in 1997, some were shocked that it was not even a Canadian, but instead Hong Kong *Standard* publisher Sally Aw Sian. Outrage followed when it was revealed that in exchange for a \$3-million donation to erect a building to house a school of journalism on the UBC campus (and a promise of continued financial support for operating expenses) the university had agreed to name the new school after the Sing Tao newspaper chain Aw also owned, an edition of which was published daily in Vancouver to serve a growing Chinese population there.

(Compton, 1998: 23)

The furore flared up again in early 1999 when several Sing Tao executives were jailed for fraud in Hong Kong after an investigation into inflated circulation figures there found advertisers had been overcharged. (DeCloet, 1999) Sing Tao's legal and financial difficulties prevented it from keeping up its promised funding commitment to UBC, which fact university administrators managed to keep quiet until word leaked out just before the first seventeen graduates of the Sing Tao School of Journalism were set to

receive their Master's degrees. To make up the shortfall in the journalism school's budget, the UBC Board of Governors diverted money from its special purposes funds before approving an annual allocation of \$420,000 from its general operating revenues. (Lobo, 2000) The university also stripped the Sing Tao name from the school's title, rendering it the generic School of Journalism. Many of the UBC journalism students learned of the name change only from reading a report in the independent campus newspaper, and in response they formed a union with the stated aim of gaining greater transparency from administrators. (Norbjerg, 2001) The journalism school's director, Donna Logan, insisted her embattled program was on "sound financial footing, but like every other unit on campus, we would like more money." (Lobo, 2000)

Increased corporate funding

One alternative source of needed funding for Canadian journalism schools has been corporate money channeled through the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and its "Public Benefits" program, which was conceived in the late 1980s to ensure that a portion of the proceeds from corporate takeovers of media companies goes toward worthwhile media projects. One 2001 study found that some of the corporate takeover money has found its way into schools of journalism.

These packages usually emphasize direct programming initiatives, but nevertheless a number of endowed professorships have resulted. Examples of this so-called "greenmail" are chairs at Ryerson, King's College, and Regina that were funded by Maclean Hunter in 1988; one at Western [Ontario] established by Rogers Communications in 1995; and chairs endowed in 2000 by the largest private television network, CTV, at Laval and Carleton. ((Johansen , et. al, 2001: 476)

The "greenmail" endowments serve several purposes for media companies – satisfying the demands of the CRTC that they give something back for the public's benefit, ensuring perpetual brand recognition in the named professorships they create,

and also making the media scholars who should be their closest critics beholden to them for millions of dollars. The latter point was made uncomfortably clear to Desbarats while he was dean of the journalism school at Western Ontario, which benefited from a \$1 million donation from Rogers Communication in 1995. “When journalists subsequently asked me to comment on the Rogers takeover of Maclean Hunter, all I could do was draw their attention to the donation,” noted Desbarats after leaving UWO. “They understood right away that I had been, to express it crudely, bought.” (Desbarats, 1998)

The takeover of the CTV television network in the spring of 2000 by telecom giant Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE) provided an even greater windfall for Canadian journalism schools, as the Public Benefits package that came along with the \$2.3-billion deal amounted to \$230 million. Of that, \$2.5 million was earmarked for an endowed chair in media convergence at Ryerson, contingent on the CRTC’s approval of the takeover. (Sekeris, 2000) As part of the same Public Benefits package, BCE provided another \$3.5 million to fund a Canadian Media Research Consortium set up between several universities, including Ryerson, Laval, and UBC, with a mandate to “focus on the development of Canadian data for use in media planning.” (BCE Inc., 2000) *National Post* columnist Terence Corcoran described the CMRC as “a hitherto unknown group founded for the sole purpose of skimming a graft off the CTV takeover,” and pointed out that it effectively recycled the Public Benefits money paid by acquiring corporations back toward their own private R&D interests. “If the major corporations . . . want research into the media, then surely they can spend their own money up front rather than cash extorted . . . via a regulator.” (Corcoran, 2001) A letter-writing campaign to the CRTC by academics speaking in support of the media mega-merger led the Canadian Journalism Foundation to sever its association with the CMRC over allegations of conflict of interest. Corcoran urged the CJF to “leave the academics to wallow in their

own petty corruptions” in detailing the conflicts involved if it continued to participate in the Public Benefits program.

That leaves the foundation, set up by major corporations to raise ethical standards in the media, in the position of having participated in the extortion of money from BCE in return for providing a fawning defense of its takeover of CTV. Lining up for part of the payoff are some of Canada's leading journalism academics. All of this should make good fodder for the next foundation educational session to help raise the standards of journalistic ethics and reporting. (Corcoran, 2001)

The question of convergence became the subject of CRTC hearings in 2001 following the purchase of the Southam newspaper chain by CanWest and the national daily *Globe and Mail*'s purchase by BCE. CanWest particularly gained a multimedia advantage in many Canadian cities, including Vancouver, where it suddenly owned both daily newspapers, most of the community press, and the two largest television stations.¹ Consumer advocates argued for an editorial “firewall” between CTV and CanWest’s television news operations and those of their newly-acquired newspapers in order to protect what diversity remained in the Canadian news media. Some academics, however, argued against any safeguards being placed on the broadcasters’ news operations, instead testifying at CRTC hearings that news media convergence would be in the public’s best interest. “One of the things that has always disturbed me about journalism in Canada is that there were too many reporters chasing so few stories,” testified UBC’s Donna Logan. “Converged journalism offers an opportunity to break out of that mould by freeing up reporters to do stories that are not being done and are vital to democratic discourse.” (Code of conduct, 2001) The seven-year broadcasting licenses of BCE and CanWest Global were subsequently extended without restriction. Two months after Logan gave her testimony to the CRTC, CanWest announced it was making a \$500,000

¹ CanWest was required by the CRTC to divest one of the two stations, however, and it chose to sell its original CKVU and retain the market-leading BCTV it had acquired.

endowment to the School of Journalism at UBC. “We're going to become the premier news organization in the country,” said company president Leonard Asper on a campus visit. “We're going to invest in the nuts and bolts of that by starting with journalism. We believe in the principles of journalism and their enhancement.” (CanWest pledges, 2001) After a subsequent series of journalism controversies cast doubt on Asper’s statement, Logan publicly played down the extent of CanWest’s media influence on Canada’s west coast, going on radio in mid-2002 to say that “the situation in Vancouver is one of the things that gets overblown, because we actually are in a very competitive situation here.” (Edge, 2002: 9)

Conclusions

The traditional role of the press to act as a watchdog on powerful institutions has become muted by the increased concentration of its ownership into one of the most powerful institutions of all. The need for media scholars to act in turn as informed critics of the press has thus become greater even as it has become threatened by co-option from corporate funding. The question of influence that emerges raises the issue of in whose interest university educators should be expected not only to operate, but also to advocate. As Desbarats noted from experience, the independence granted to faculty by universities through tenure can become “rapidly eroded” through a different kind of dependence – on industry through the need for fundraising. “Unavoidably I gave up something in return,” he concluded after accepting a corporate endowment. “No one should pretend, least of all university presidents, that this experience, multiplied many times and repeated over the years, doesn't damage universities in the long run.” (Desbarats, 1998)

The Public Benefits program set up by the CRTC seems an ideal source of needed funding for higher education in journalism in Canada, but as long as media companies are able to decide which university programs get the money, the question of

corporate influence will remain of concern. Similarly, the “data for use in media planning” obtained by bodies established with this Public Benefits funding, such as the Canadian Media Research Consortium, will likewise tend to serve private interests rather than advancing understanding of the political, social and journalistic implications of increased corporate consolidation of media ownership. Ensuring that the Public Benefits program actually operates to the benefit of the public will require an arm’s-length relationship from funding corporations that sees the money allocated in an impartial way. Only this way can the question of influence over journalism education in Canada be resolved and any appearance of conflict of interest be avoided. This will require that the university tradition prevail over the corporate model of higher education funded by private interests. In turn, however, the higher ideals of professionalism would be more likely to be upheld in journalism itself, to the benefit of the public interest.

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