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The Press We Deserve: A Legacy of Unheeded Warnings

No one who followed the debate over press concentration during the 1970s and 1980s should be surprised at the current state of control of the Canadian newspaper industry. Successive federal government inquiries warned that the inevitable result, absent any measures to slow or reverse the inexorable economics of a business classically subject to the cost-saving advantages of large size, would be control of the country's press by a few powerful businessmen. But the predictions of Keith Davey and Tom Kent resulted in only inaction; their reports languished dog-eared on Canadian bookshelves, where they had been placed out of mind by a generation grown weary of the debate over press regulation. After that, it was perhaps predictable that the acquirers who paid increasingly higher prices for publication empires would justify their costs by exerting political influence as a form of value added. But the new realities of ownership now being visited upon the nation's press have crept up quietly, until the overt exercise of accumulated power has again raised the question of whether something should, or even could, be done about it.

Aside from the acknowledged economic forces, the situation arose as a result of several factors, two of which have been well-recognized, and one of which I will argue has been under-appreciated. The two familiar complaints have been a lack of political will to enact specific legislative measures to preserve the independence of the press and the historic ineffectiveness of anti-combines laws already on the books, nominally intended to prevent monopoly business practices. A third was, in hindsight, increased ownership of newspaper chains by stock market investors, which allowed their eventual acquisition by takeover artists. This paper reviews those factors in historical context, with some comparison to the situation in the United States, and discusses some possible counterbalancing factors which might affect the current situation. Finally, a new variable that has entered the equation, with perhaps even more disturbing implications, is discussed.

Political Hesitance

The emergence of Winnipeg-based F.P. Publications as the largest newspaper group in Canada following its merger with the *Toronto Globe and*

Mail in 1965, marginally ahead of the family-owned Southam chain, set off alarm bells for some that ownership of the nation's press had become accumulated in too few hands. From a regional partnership formed in 1958 by Calgary *Albertan* publisher Max Bell and Winnipeg *Free Press* owner Victor Sifton, F.P. Publications had grown into a national chain with its acquisition of the *Ottawa Journal* in 1959 and the *Vancouver Sun* in 1963.¹ One of those most concerned about increasing control of the press by large chains that grew by acquiring hitherto independent dailies was Keith Davey. The federal Liberal party head was appointed to the Senate at his own request in 1966 by then prime minister Lester Pearson as a reward for service and his fundraising ability, which earned him the nickname "The Rainmaker." The former advertising executive held a keen interest in the newspaper business; his father had worked at the *Toronto Star* for more than 50 years. Davey confessed in his memoirs a fascination with newspapers despite his choice of a career in radio. "Much as I wanted to be in the newspaper business myself, to my way of thinking I could not work at the *Star* because of my father, nor could I work on staff at any other daily newspaper because of him" (Rainmaker 8).

Davey first proposed an investigation into the growing corporate control of Canada's press in 1968. Initially considering Parliament the appropriate body to conduct such an inquiry, Davey noted in the preface to the three-volume report of his Special Senate Committee on Mass Media in 1970 that he felt appointed senators would be better insulated from direct political pressure brought by publishers against any measures proposed to counter press concentration. Davey observed that his concerns about political influence on elected politicians had been borne out in the interim by easy passage through the elected U.S. Senate of the Newspaper Preservation Act, which exempted from federal anti-trust laws dozens of newspapers that had for years been sharing production facilities, setting advertising rates jointly, and pooling profits. U.S. president Richard Nixon's flip-flop on the issue, according to Davey, justified his concern that "politicians looking to re-election must depend substantially upon the mass media in the very real world of practical politics" (Uncertain vii).

The Davey committee forced media corporations to open their books for the first time and the senators not only found their profits "astonishing," but also declared the secrecy surrounding them delicious in its hypocrisy. "An industry that is supposed to abhor secrets is sitting on one of the best-kept, least-discussed secrets, one of the hottest scoops, in the entire field of Canadian business—their own balance sheets" (Davey Uncertain 63). By 1970, "genuine" newspaper competition existed in only five Canadian cities, the Senate report noted, with the Southam, Thomson and F.P. Publications chains controlling 44.7 per cent of the country's daily newspaper circulation, compared with 25 per cent in 1958.

This tendency could ... lead to a situation whereby the news (which we must start thinking of as a public resource, like electricity) is controlled and manipulated by a small group of individuals and corporations whose view of What's Fit to Print may closely coincide with ... What's Good For Business ... There is some evidence, in fact, which suggests we are in that boat already (Davey Uncertain 4).

To remedy the situation, Davey's committee proposed measures that would have worked against press concentration from both the supply and demand sides. Stating that its intention was not to determine whether the tendency toward press monopoly was a good thing or a bad thing—"of course it's a bad thing"—the committee reasoned that the real-world problem was to strike a balance: "How do you reconcile the media's tendency toward monopoly with society's need for diversity?" (Davey Uncertain 4). Included in the measures it recommended to deal with the problem was a Press Ownership Review Board, similar to one in the United Kingdom, to approve—or, more likely, disapprove—paper sales or mergers. Such a board's basic guideline, according to the report, should be that "all transactions that increase concentration of ownership in the mass media are undesirable and contrary to the public interest—unless shown to be otherwise" (Davey Uncertain 71). A system of government subsidies to encourage alternative publications, such as those in place in several Scandinavian countries, was also proposed. But while the Davey committee's recommendations caused a commotion in Canadian media circles, its recommendations for stemming the tide of press ownership concentration created more heat than light, and were never enacted. "We had to conclude that we have in this country not the press we need, but rather the press we deserve," recalled Davey in his memoirs. "The sad fact is that the media must self-regulate because most Canadians are not prepared to demand the press they need" (Davey Rainmaker 153).

The early warnings of the Davey Committee that failed to stimulate political will to control press concentration marked the first, best chance to sandbag the rising tide of media ownership in Canada, but despite its prescriptions, the worst was yet to come. Introduction of a Press Ownership Review Board such as proposed by Davey would likely have prevented the events of August 27, 1980, a date that lives in Canadian newspaper infamy as "Black Wednesday." Closure on that day of the *Ottawa Journal*, by the international Thomson conglomerate, which had earlier that year won a bidding war for financially-faltering F.P. Publications, and of the *Winnipeg Tribune* by Southam—with each giving the other a local monopoly in that market—resulted in national outrage on a scale that suggested a consensus was extant over the need for restrictions on the growth of newspaper chains. Even the owners admitted something should be done. A Royal Commission on Newspapers was called almost immediately by then prime minister Pierre

Trudeau to investigate and it pointed out less than a year later what was obvious to everyone. "Newspaper competition, of the kind that used to be, is virtually dead in Canada," reported the commission chaired by Tom Kent. "This ought not to have been allowed to happen" (Kent Commission 215-218).

Kent had been editor of the *Winnipeg Free Press* before entering the federal civil service, where he served as chief architect of the modern Canadian welfare state constructed by successive Liberal governments of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1980, he was appointed dean of administrative studies at Dalhousie University in Halifax. He and lieutenants Borden Spears, a former *Toronto Star* editor, and Laurent Picard, a former CBC president, quickly convened cross-country public hearings into newspaper ownership. Southam president Gordon Fisher admitted in an appearance before the commission that his family's chain had grown too large and that an ownership review mechanism, such as had been suggested by the Davey Committee, would be an appropriate check on the size of newspaper companies. Lord Thomson of Fleet agreed there was a limit to how many Canadian newspapers he should own, but insisted he would know when a reasonable limit had been reached without a government regulator to tell him. "I have the intent, integrity and judgment to know when to stop," said Ken Thomson, who had inherited his hereditary title and been left Canada's only billionaire upon the death of his father, Roy Thomson, in 1976. But if a controlling factor over his national media holdings was deemed necessary, Thomson insisted it should be administered by a non-governmental body (Lewis Nobody 32-33).

Noting in its 1981 report that the Southam and Thomson chains then controlled 59 per cent of the nation's daily newspaper circulation, the Kent Commission warned that the situation would only grow worse if limits were not enacted. It proposed to restrict the percentage of any region's press that one chain could control, and even called for forced divestiture by chains to achieve regional diversity. Under Kent's plan, Thomson would have been required to sell a portion of his extensive Ontario holdings, the Sifton family to divest one of its two dailies in Saskatchewan, and the Irving family to give up part of its press monopoly in New Brunswick. But the Canada Newspaper Act proposed as a result of the Kent Commission report would have imposed less strict controls, and it was never tabled. The Trudeau government instead pursued repatriation of the Constitution from Britain and enactment of a Charter of Rights in its dying days before the federal government changed from Liberal to Conservative. Reaction of publishers to Kent's proposed intrusion on their right to "freedom of the press" had been swift and furious, and introducing press controls at the expense of Trudeau's legacy priorities would have encountered stiff resistance. The *Globe and Mail* lambasted the Kent Commission report as a "veritable idiot's delight of interference in the ownership and operation of the nation's press" (Lewis Pressure 30). In defeat,

Kent reiterated the fundamental conundrum of press regulation first enunciated by Davey—that its very undertaking was unlikely if left to politicians beholden for their re-election to public opinion moulded to a great extent by news coverage. The vituperative nature of the publishers' campaign against controls on press ownership, Kent observed, "fully confirms the analysis of the state of the problems of the newspaper industry" (Lewis Pressure 30).

Legal Ineffectualness

The Kent Commission stopped short of recommending divestiture of any dailies by Southam, which controlled more of the nation's press than Thomson but published newspapers the commissioners found of higher quality. This was despite the fact that Southam had, as part of the Black Wednesday dealings, obtained a monopoly in Vancouver, where it controlled both daily newspapers with its acquisition from Thomson of the afternoon *Vancouver Sun* to complement the morning *Province* it had owned since 1923. Southam's \$40-million purchase had been overshadowed by the closure of long-publishing dailies in Ottawa and Winnipeg, but it did not escape the attention of investigators for the Restrictive Trade Practices Commission. Southam and Thomson were charged by the federal justice department on May 1, 1981, with criminal conspiracy, monopoly and merger as a result of their dealings in Ottawa, Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Montreal, where a 25-per-cent interest in Southam's *Gazette* had also changed hands.

But federal anti-combines law had proven ineffective at preventing newspaper monopolies due to a requirement of proving present detriment to the public, as opposed to raising the possibility of future detriment. A 1972 conviction obtained under the criminal provisions of the Restrictive Trade Practices Act against industrialist K.C. Irving, who controlled all four dailies in New Brunswick through a network of family companies, had been overturned in 1976 by the Supreme Court of Canada. The result was no more successful after Black Wednesday, as the Southam and Thomson chain heads testified they acted without collusion and a judge who deemed them credible witnesses acquitted the defendant corporations. As a result, in 1986 new civil sanctions against corporate monopoly practices, which did not carry the heavy burden of proof inherent in criminal charges, were enacted by the federal government in the form of the Competition Tribunal of experts empowered to order divestiture in cases where competition was found to have been lessened. But after Southam countered growing competition in suburban Vancouver by buying up most of the community press there in a series of acquisitions between 1989 and 1991, a divestiture order issued by the tribunal proved unenforceable when Southam successfully appealed it to the Supreme Court of Canada.

Share ownership

Thomson's acquisition of F.P. Publications in 1980, which was the impe-

tus behind the events of Black Wednesday, came as a result of widely-dispersed share ownership in the company following the deaths of its founding partners. A bidding war erupted in late 1979 after F.P. posted a year-end loss for the first time following a series of financially-disastrous strikes at its dailies in Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver. Among the bidders was a young Conrad Black, but Thomson's oil riches, gained from astute North Sea investments by his father, the first Lord Thomson, proved too formidable for the aspiring press lord to outbid. Instead, Black turned his attention from Canada and eventually acquired major dailies in London, Chicago, and Jerusalem, as well as a chain of more than 340 minor U.S. titles that was by the mid-1990s numerically that country's second largest, although barely in the top ten by circulation because of their small size. Enriched especially by his investment in England's *Daily Telegraph*, which quickly shed its expensive unions under his stewardship, Black continued to seek a presence in the newspaper industry of his native land. When the historic Southam chain, which had "gone public" with a stock issue in 1945, became weakened by losses in the early 1990s, Black's Hollinger, Inc., began to buy up shares in the company until by 1997 it had gained control. With acquisition of the Southam dailies Black had coveted for so long, Hollinger became the third-largest newspaper chain in the world, as measured by circulation (Jones 40). However, losses incurred on startup of the *National Post*, conceived as a national daily to counter the liberal politics of the *Globe and Mail* that he opposed, forced Black to sell. Hollinger's flipping of the Southam dailies to television network CanWest Global Communications in 2000 resulted in their current ownership by the Asper family of Winnipeg, which openly supports the Liberal party.

"Public" ownership of newspaper company shares has been seen in the U.S. as contributing to a degradation of journalistic quality due to a fixation on the short-term bottom line by financial analysts determined to drive share prices. Calls have recently been made for regulation of the industry there despite historic and formidable press freedom enshrined in the Bill of Rights (Cranberg, Bezanson and Soloski). Critics such as Ben Bagdikian have warned since the 1970s that stock market ownership in effect created a "third market" for newspapers, in addition to the dual markets in which they are acknowledged to compete, for information and advertising.

The impact of trading newspaper corporate stock on the stock market has meant that news companies must constantly expand in size and rate of profits in order to maintain their position on stock exchanges. ... Instead of the single master so celebrated in the rhetoric of the industry—the reader—there are in fact three masters (Bagdikian Conglomeration 64).

In Canada, the market for newspaper ownership is much smaller than in the U.S., where serious concern over concentration began in the 1980s,

when ownership of more than half of the nation's press became held by not two or three chains, as in Canada, but by fourteen (Bagdikian Media 18). Only recently has the phenomenon of newspaper chains taking over other newspaper chains been seen in the U.S., as with the parent company of the *Chicago Tribune* acquiring the parent company of the *Los Angeles Times*. In Canada, concentration of press ownership reached a near-maximum decades ago, making cross-media ownership now the most profitable method of corporate expansion, with electronic media and newspapers "converging" to provide synergies of operation and allow increased efficiencies through reductions in resource duplication between media. While the current situation was allowed by weak anti-combines laws and a political hesitancy to regulate the newspaper industry, to a large extent the driving force behind it was pressure on the financial bottom line created by stock market trading in shares of its ownership (Edge Pacific).

Implications

In the U.S., increased corporate control of the press has resulted in closer co-operation between newspapers and advertisers in many major centres, with mandated demolition in some newsrooms of the time-honoured wall separating the "church" of news coverage and the "state" of advertising sales (Edge Wall). In Canada, the trend has instead been toward increased political advocacy by the former Southam newspapers, first under Hollinger on behalf of the right-wing Alliance party (Edge Byline 6). Most recently, sale to CanWest Global has seen them used to further the political agenda of the owning Asper family in support of the federal Liberals and for policies favouring Israel (Grace 10). But the political influence may have been purchased at too high a price if the result is as in the U.S., with a loss of credibility dropping readership as the dailies become seen increasingly as instruments of commercial or political advocacy (Roberts, Kunkil and Layton). This only becomes an obstacle to corporate media ownership, however, if voices of opposition are heard.

In the U.S., where journalism scholarship is at its most voluminous worldwide, with upward of 460 journalism schools populated by faculty charged to "publish or perish," criticism of corporate press ownership and exposition of its implications for democracy have been consistently heard. Journalism reviews published at Columbia University (*Columbia Journalism Review*) and the University of Maryland (*American Journalism Review*) have been particularly critical of the corporate ownership model and its effect on both journalism and journalists. But increased corporate funding of journalism schools in the U.S. has also led to closer co-operation between ownership and the academy, with a perceived muting of criticism from schools that increasingly mix editorial training with courses in corporate communication, marketing, public relations and advertising (Ledbetter 73).

In Canada, where schools of journalism at the university level can be

counted on the fingers of two hands, scholarship critical of the press has been confined to an easily-ignored minority. Journalism reviews, aside from the quarterly *Media* magazine published by the Canadian Association of Journalists, are mostly student-written and Web-based. A recent increase in the number of university journalism programs, especially in Western Canada, has raised hope among some for an increased voice in opposition to corporate media control, opposition which has been led so far by two independent newspapers, the *Toronto Star* and the newly-independent (since shucking its chain stalemates) *Globe and Mail*. However, this hope has proven somewhat premature, perhaps because of an increased proportion of funding for higher education coming from corporate sources, as in the U.S.

For example, the new graduate school of journalism at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver was only brought to life in 1997 by corporate generosity after being stillborn since its conception in the early 1980s due to cutbacks in government funding for higher education. The alternative of private funding, however, has proven problematic by making Canadian universities increasingly subject to market considerations (Tudiver). The corporate gift to UBC turned out to be embarrassing not only for the furor surrounding the naming of its journalism school after the funding Sing Tao newspaper company based in Hong Kong, but also for the subsequent removal of the name after a circulation scandal back home prevented the company from keeping up its promised funding (\$3 m, 39).

Donna Logan, director of the erstwhile Sing Tao School of Journalism, has proven an effective advocate of both corporate funding and media convergence. Far from holding the owners of media corporations to account on behalf of the public, Logan's view topples the journalistic paradigm while turning Davey's dictum on its head.

"What gets me upset is when people automatically say concentration of ownership is bad and divestiture is good," Logan told the *Vancouver Sun* in 2000, as Conrad Black prepared to unload his acquired empire. "With a concentration of ownership there is always the possibility for bad things to happen. But some of the major newspapers had improvements in their editorial quality when Hollinger took over. It will really depend on who buys them" (Quoted in Sieberg D5).

The buyer proved to be CanWest, which suddenly owned both of Vancouver's daily newspapers in addition to its two largest television stations, and Logan emerged as a vocal proponent of convergence.² "If the dangers of media ownership concentration were as dire as some critics would have us believe, the people of Vancouver would be rioting in the streets," she wrote for a special issue of *Media* magazine dealing with the convergence controversy. "The good news is that content really is king as newspapers and TV stations scramble to create live Web sites and cable television stations proliferate at an unprecedented rate" (Logan Mega Media 15).

But when the Aspers went before the CRTC in 2001 for renewal of their broadcast licences and to defend their plans to converge their print and television news operations, Logan went too far for some, testifying at the week-long hearing: “One of the things that has always disturbed me about journalism in Canada is that there were too many reporters chasing so few stories. 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” (Debate CP Newswire). Wrote veteran Ottawa journalist Claire Hoy:

“Is she serious? What converged journalism really does is provide an opportunity for the TV-print operation to cover the stories with a single reporter instead of two or more reporters. They’re not interested in freeing up reporters to chase stories they’re not doing now. They’re only interested in freeing up their bottom lines by doing the same work with fewer reporters” (6).

Two months after the hearings, CanWest Global announced it was making a \$500,000 endowment to the School of Journalism at UBC. “We’re going to become the premier news organization in the country,” said Leonard Asper on a visit to the school. “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 Global, CP). That fall, UBC’s journalism school hosted a conference on convergence described as an “invitation-only Summit meeting of journalists, and media and news executives from across the country.” Notably lacking in Canadian scholars, the conference was billed as providing “opportunities to get beyond the polarized rhetoric that has dominated the debate about convergence.” Putting talk about convergence into action, the proceedings were later broadcast on the CanWest Global television network.

Then in mid-2002, CanWest Global stirred the long-simmering pot of press-freedom issues by sacking *Ottawa Citizen* publisher Russell Mills after his newspaper ran an editorial calling for the resignation of Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.

“I think it might be going a bit too far to say freedom of the press is in jeopardy,” Logan told open-line host Rafe Mair on CKNW. “We should really avoid overblown rhetoric” (Logan CKNW).

When a caller phoned in to decry CanWest Global’s ownership of almost all of the Vancouver-area press, including both dailies and most community newspapers, Logan responded:

“I think the situation in Vancouver is one of the things that gets overblown, because we actually are in a very competitive situation here. Yes, the Aspers control both of the newspapers, but we’ve got two new television stations that have just come into the

market. We've got a third one coming on line. These are not owned by the Aspers, and so the television situation is becoming much more competitive" (Logan CKNW).

When host Mair returned the discussion to the matter of a near-total monopoly in local newspaper ownership, Logan named two free Vancouver weeklies *not* owned by CanWest Global: "There is the *Georgia Straight*," she said. "And there are [sic] the *West Ender* ... so there are alternatives. ... I mean, I don't think the situation is as dire as that."

If allegiance to the corporate model of journalism succeeds in silencing independent voices both in the press and in critical scholarship, Canadians will be left not only with the press they deserve, but also with no inkling they might require anything more. Abdication by the academy of its obligation to act as a watchdog on the press, which is nominally charged in lore with that societal function, makes it a witting accomplice in the ultimate surrender to a privileged few of control over not just the nation's media, but also, as a result, largely its political agenda. Concentrated ownership of the press coupled with corporate funding for schools of journalism and communications clearly raises serious questions about the potential threats to academic integrity. And the warnings of Davey and Kent, even as they grow dimmer with the passage of time, gain resonance in the ear tuned toward their unheeded message.

A former Vancouver newspaperman, Marc Edge holds a Master's degree in Labour and Industrial Relations from Michigan State University and was a member of the Newspaper Guild bargaining committee during the 1984 strike at Pacific Press. In 2001, he completed a PhD in Mass Communication from the widely respected E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University. His award-winning doctoral dissertation was the basis for his book, Pacific Press: The Unauthorized Story of Vancouver's Newspaper Monopoly. Now an assistant professor in the School of Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, Professor Edge may be reached at: mail@marcedge.com

Notes

- 1 The acronym stood not for "Free Press," as many assumed, but instead for "Federated Papers."
- 2 CanWest Global sold CKVU; it was ordered by the CRTC to divest itself of the station upon its acquisition of market-leading BCTV.
- 3 Web site of the UBC School of Journalism, 2001
<http://www.journalism.ubc.ca/events_convergence.html>
- 4 *Ibid.*

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