

aspects of our enquiry was the ingenuous view of so many media owners that they are mere spectators. They're *not* spectators. They control the presentation of the news, and therefore have a vast and perhaps disproportionate say in how our society defines itself. It is true, as we were repeatedly reminded by the people who appeared before us, that newspapers can't swing elections any more, that the media's ability to control and manipulate events is vastly overrated. That's like saying an air-traffic controller can't prevent airplanes from landing. Of course he can't; but he can dictate the order in which they land, or send them to another airport. The power of the press, in other words, is the power of selection. Newspapers and broadcasting stations can't dictate how we think and vote on specific issues; but their influence in *selecting* those issues can be enormous. *Of course* the people won't always vote the way the editorial-writers tell them on next week's sewer bylaw; but who decides when they'll start thinking and talking about sewers – or whether they'll worry about pollution at all?

This quaint notion of media-as-spectator appears to be shared by most of the people who control the corporations that control the news. But then, too many publishers and broadcasters seem to harbour a positive affection for the nineteenth century. One eminent publisher, for instance, told us his definition of press freedom included "the right of the public to buy a newspaper each day if they wish, to write letters to the editor, or to start a paper of their own if they don't like it." We are reminded by this of the inalienable right of every Englishman to occupy the royal suite at the Savoy Hotel – *if* he can afford it.

Unfortunately, this flair for sheer, crashing irrelevancy seems to be part of the media's conventional wisdom. Time and again we were presented with similar pious declarations, the sort of thing publishers have been telling service-club luncheons since at least the 1940s. Somehow they always seemed to miss the point.

*Item:* "Freedom of the press is essential to a healthy democracy." Of course it is; who would disagree? But the question is, is this freedom enhanced or diminished by corporate control of the news?

*Item:* "We strive to be objective on our news pages, and leave our opinions to the editorial-writers." Great. But what do you mean by "objectivity"? Suppose there's a pulp mill or a nickel refinery dumping millions of gallons of effluent into the nearest river, and the local newspaper says nothing about it unless it's reporting a speech by some local conservationist. Is *that* objectivity? In trying to assess fairness and objectivity, aren't the stories a paper *doesn't* print, the facts it doesn't bother to collect, just as important as the ones it does?

*Item:* "We're not influenced by advertisers." We believe this. There are very few publishers who will keep a local advertiser's name out of the paper if he's nailed on an impaired-driving charge. But isn't the very *fact* of advertising