

# .. objective journalism

Journal in Ottawa, leaving the Southam chain unrivalled there. There were charges that these closings constituted restrictive trade practices, and a Royal Commission of Inquiry was established to investigate.

The reason given by Canada's famous Lord Thomson of Fleet for media take-overs is clear: "I buy newspapers to make money to buy more newspapers to make more money."

In a recent study, the declining quality of journalism in Canada was documented by the University of Quebec in Montreal. Fewer and fewer journalists are investigating stories on their own. Researchers found out that for the period under study, 67 per cent of TV news coverage was exclusively the thought and opinion of government officials.

#### (iv) Distortions caused by limited access to media

### All the news that fits...

In the midst of a union organising drive in the 1930's, the *Halifax Herald* abruptly withdrew its labour reporters, and a news blackout on the drive ensued. One of the organisers, Charles Murray, asked the *Herald's* publisher why the paper had done this. Didn't he think the paper had a responsibility at least to report the facts? His reply:

"We've no obligation to build your union for you."

The fact that very few people have access to the media can affect the actual messages they relay as well. The very images the media relay (e.g., wives of Texas oil millionaires, spies, police, etc.) bear no relation to the lives and work of the vast majority of people in this country or around the world. The result is a distortion of reality.

For examples, of the 6,900 radio stations in the United States in 1971, blacks owned only eleven, though they formed 10 per cent of the American population. Of the 848 TV stations, blacks owned none. The thousands of blacks who keep America's industries working, those who teach in its cities, work in its mines or harvest its crops, do not appear in American television images.

Similarly, Canadians as an entire people are almost invisible in their own mass media programming. Few prime-time TV shows are Canadian or have Canadian content, apart from hockey. Testifying before Canada's Senate Committee, one advertising executive criticised the way editorial decisions are made in the mass media:

The measure of editorial acceptability becomes 'How does it fit?' or 'Will it interest the affluent?'. As a consequence, the mass media increasingly reflect the attitudes and deal with the concerns of the affluent. We don't have mass media, we have class media - media for the upper and middle classes.

The poor, the young, the old, the Indian, the Eskimos, the blacks, are virtually ignored. It is as if they don't exist. More important, these minority groups are denied expression in the mass media because they cannot command attention as the affluent can.

Distortions can also be caused by limited public access to the information that mass media do possess. When an experienced journalist wrote the Southam newspaper chain to protest against a travel article that appeared to him to be a thinly disguised public relations article for a large private Canadian airline, this was the reply he got from the paper's publisher:

I think perhaps you have become so accustomed to

investigative reporting that you have fallen into the trap of assuming that you have some right to detailed knowledge and information in any area that crosses your mind. Such is really not the case...

He had asked whether the writer was from the marketing department or a bona fide journalist. Although the journalist's concerns proved to have been well founded, the paper was under no obligation to report to its readers the nature of the distortion - promotional material passing for news.

#### (v) Unconscious bias

However, perhaps the most unsettling trend today is the subtlest and most difficult to recognize.

Far-reaching and profound in its influence, it may be the least tangible. This is the often unconscious distortion of events and issues that results when the interests of a newspaper, TV station or other media outlet coincide with the way a journalist already views the world.

A study done for the Royal Commission on Corporate Concentration, titled *The newspaper and freedom of information*, recognises how ownership can affect the content of newspapers. Media owners could:

*easily influence the general orientation of a newspaper and thereby can influence news content in many ways. Thus, through selection of managers at the supervisory level, the choice of editorial writers and journalists, monetary and intangible rewards, biased guidelines and direct intervention, owners can considerably influence the handling of the news.*

When the general orientation of news reporters, commentators, researchers, editors and producers reflects that of the owners, it then is a matter of chance if journalists uncover a "real story" - not a matter of profession. If all of them have similar starting points and outlooks on the world, the news and the images they make for the mass media become "homogenised".



#### (vi) Technology

"- But ownership of the media by a few people is necessary and inevitable! In an age when technology is increasing in sophistication (and hence cost) almost by the month, and especially in a country as big as Canada, who else but the very rich could afford to own a newspaper or a TV station?"

Some variation of this position can be heard quite often.

Technology itself, the argument goes, requires increasing interdependency, and thus increasing control. The small number of media owners is necessary - in fact inevitable, according to this argument.

Technological change is already a major global issue today, and will indeed present increasingly acute problems as time passes. Unemployment, trade barriers, and many other trends cannot be fully understood without considering its impact. However, we must first remember that technology does not develop magically on its own, and then confront humans with a *fait accompli*. Humans create technology for specific reasons, with research and development financing of some kind. Technology may well surprise a society that is not prepared for it. However, this happens because the people who are responsible have not informed society of these developments or their implications (for example, the connection between automation and unemployment, or nuclear technology and its risks).

Furthermore, refining and improving high technology (as is done in the media industries) is a deliberate choice that is being made over refining and improving other, medium or low technologies. Which technology - high, medium or low - is the appropriate technology? Who has the power to decide? Author Robert Cirino suggests that the myth that only the other side uses propaganda does not deal with the decided bias that is introduced into the media by technical or financial requirements of high technology. He maintains that "all the people in the world are in a state of being propagandised by the very technical and financial nature of modern communications."

Just as the tail does not wag the dog, technology does not determine the media's future: *those who control the media determine its technology*. For this reason we must ask some basic questions.

- Who makes the decisions to develop these increasingly sophisticated (and interdependent) technologies? How has the development of these new technologies been paid for?
- For what reasons have these new technologies been developed? In what institutions was the original research done, and for what reasons?

Attempting to provide all the specific answers to such questions is not the aim of this book. However, such crucial questions must nevertheless be asked when examining ownership and control of the media. High, medium or low technology in itself is neither good nor bad: the *use it is put to* determines this.

Finally, the question of increasing sophistication of mass media technology must be clearly separated from that of programme quality. Instant communication does not guarantee that the *quality* of news is improved. For example, the quality of newsreporting in a paper is not necessarily any better because computerized telecommunications equipment allow stories to be written, edited, typeset for printing and relayed to other computer terminals all in one, nearly instantaneous, operation. Such technology accelerates information exchange, but can in no way guarantee that the information itself is of any worth.

(Ed's note: This excerpt does not include footnotes which appear in the original text.)

