

Student paper wants eye for an eye

by Ira Nayman
and Doug Saunders

The staff of the Ryerson *Eyeopener* celebrated the paper's 25th birthday this month by butting heads with a media megacorporation — and getting a scornful glare in return.

Operating out of the basement of Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnical since 1966, the *Eyeopener* has long been a radical alternative to both the mainstream dailies and to Ryerson's journalism school paper *The Ryersonian*.

And, according to Editor Mike O'Connor, it has always been called "The Eye" — both in print and on campus. It actually uses that term in its advertising, printing and employment contracts.

This created some embarrassment when *eye* magazine appeared on the stands earlier this month. Published by the powerful Torstar Corporation (which owns the *Toronto Star* — Canada's largest-circulation paper — as well as scores of other papers through its subsidiary Metroland), *eye* uses the visual look and editorial style of the student press to sell glossy advertising.

"We've had a lot of explaining to do," O'Connor says. He estimates the *Eyeopener* received between 20 and 50 calls a day asking about *eye* in early October.

The *Eyeopener* may have a copyright infringement case against the new tabloid, even though the students have never registered their name, O'Connor says. But when the *Eyeopener* approached *eye*'s lawyers, "they told us 'go ahead, try to sue us. We're too big.'"

And the *Eyeopener*'s own lawyers told O'Connor they couldn't afford to fight Torstar.

"We've talked to lawyers, and some of them have said we have a really good case



Doug Saunders

Right between the eyes: Ryerson Eyeopener staff send the message to eye magazine

— but it would cost a lot of money and I don't know if we could afford that."

Steve Jarrett, editor of *eye*, claims the *Eyeopener* wouldn't get very far in court.

"They wouldn't have a case. We didn't steal their name."

Jarrett says the *Eyeopener*'s request for a \$250,000 out-of-court settlement is unrealistic. "In some circles," he says, "it's called blackmail."

O'Connor says this is ironic, since a corporation the size of Torstar could easily sue a small paper for a similar name infringement.

"They're a huge corporation with an entire floor full of lawyers just waiting for something like this to happen and we're just a small newspaper staffed by students."

The *Eyeopener* staff picketed Torstar's Yonge Street offices on October 17 and burned copies of *eye* in front of the main entrance. O'Connor says they were "trying to embarrass Torstar into talking with us without using lawyers."

In a sarcastic October 24 editorial, *eye* Managing Editor William Burrill responded to the *Eyeopener*. Claiming they were trying to compare *eye* to a "pizza-and-beer-stained school newspaper for journalism students" and a "school rag," he argued that the two papers' names have little in common.

"Anybody who can't tell the difference between the Ryerson *Eyeopener* and *eye* Weekly obviously can't read anyway," Burrill wrote, using *eye*'s business name.

"Practically," O'Connor wrote in his own October 9 editorial, "we don't stand a snowball's chance in hell."

"Essentially what [*eye*] is saying is that if you have enough money, you can screw over anyone you like. Just because Torstar is big and fat and grossly rich doesn't mean it has the right to do what it wants and steal our name."

Corporate 'zine eyeballs NOW

by Ira Nayman

Newspaper publishing corporations have taken a financial beating in the last couple of years. Overall ad revenues for large newspapers are down some 13 per cent from 1990.

"The market is very soft," says Ryerson teacher Paul Rush. Into this market, Torstar Corporation, publisher of the *Toronto Star*, has launched *eye*, a weekly entertainment tabloid. The first issue of *eye* appeared on October 10. It had little advertising and lots of colour, leaving an obvious question only partly answered.

Why *eye*?

"A city, no matter how big or small, never has enough newspapers if there is a will to let different opinions or facts or criticism hit the streets," Geoff Heinrichs writes in the first issue.

Some of *eye*'s competitors question its self-professed goal. "They're about as alternative as gas is to coffee," says Michael Hollett, publisher of *NOW*, describing *eye* as "a spreadsheet scenario for the guys in the boardroom."

"They figure there is a market there," Rush says. He adds that, since both publications "appeal to roughly the same audience," it is inevitable that their main competition is going to be for advertisers.

The competition between *NOW* and *eye* blew up even before *eye*'s first issue when, in the summer, *NOW* took Torstar to court to stop it from distributing a sample issue to advertisers which contained ads photocopied from *NOW*. Torstar eventually withdrew the sample from circulation. The bad feelings created by this episode are evident on both sides.

In its premier issue, *eye* ran several fake letters, including: "Dear *eye*, This is greed, not need. Michael Hault. Laughing all the way to the bank." In his story on alternative weeklies in Toronto, Heinrichs writes, "Those expensive social consciences over at, uh, *NOW*, haven't surrendered their salaries and net revenues to the Scott Mission or Haitian reforestation schemes."

"You think that's hostile?" Jarrett asks, laughing.

"I find it very undignified," Hollett replies. He adds that regular *NOW* readers were surprised at the level of animosity.

Eye's argument, that "Hollett and company...are really shiny, happy people, badly dressed — and making lots of money" carries no weight with Hollett. "We created a business to have a newspaper," Hollett says. "They're making a paper to have a business."

This kind of aggressive content seems to be part of an effort to be hip in order to appeal to a young audience. "*Eye* needs

editorial guts," Heinrichs writes, "that will lure people into picking it up every week."

"We want to get down to the streets," Jarrett says. To this end, representatives of *eye* have approached a few student newspapers to try and get freelance writers to cover events at universities. "I don't think the mainstream press covers what goes on at university campuses at all," except when something big blows up, Jarrett explained.

One publication on "the streets" that is not impressed is *The Eyeopener*, the student newspaper at Ryerson Polytechnic Institute. Since its inception 25 years ago, the newspaper has been known as "The Eye," it actually uses that term in its advertising, printing and employment contracts.

The *Eyeopener* staff have spent much of the past month protesting *eye*'s infringement on their turf, but editor Mike O'Connor says they haven't decided whether to take legal action (see accompanying article).

O'Connor also believes that *eye* "saw *NOW*'s profits and wanted to get a piece of them." He questions the viability of a "huge corporation" starting a newspaper "that's supposed to be in tune with the streets." In the *Eyeopener* editorial on the subject, he writes: "In a blinding flash of reality, the stuffed shirts down at Torstar realized the *Star* is completely unhip and that there are mega-bucks to be made in hipness like at *NOW* magazine."

Hollett fundamentally agrees. For 10 years, people at Torstar were "saying people who read *NOW* are not important," he says; but, by putting out a competing publication, "they have validated our efforts."

"The furthest thing from Torstar's mind," O'Connor sums up, "is the reader."

A fourth publication is also involved. *Showtimes*, a movie review and information weekly created out of the ashes of *Metropolis* — an entertainment weekly which published in the late 1980s — has been absorbed by *eye*. Many of *Showtimes*' staff now work for *eye*, which carries an eight-page advertising insert with the old publication's banner.

"From an editorial standpoint, I find it really confusing" to carry *Showtimes*, Jarrett admits. But he says it was a tradeoff for getting circulation in theatres: Cineplex-Odeon, which had a stake in the publication, was losing a lot of money on it and looking for a way to close it down.

Hollett believes people will support his brand of "point-of-view journalism."

"People find ideas and passion compelling."

