



Media and monopolies don't mix

The following article is an excerpt from Eleanor MacLean's book, *Between the Lines: How to detect propaganda and bias in the news and everyday life*. The book is published by DEVERIC Development Education Resource and Information Centre, based in Halifax. Eleanor MacLean formerly was a writer for *Atlantic Issues*, which was a regular supplement to the *Dal Gazette* in the late 1970's. This excerpt is reprinted courtesy of the author.

by Eleanor MacLean

You may well wonder what difference it could make if only a few people control the mass media of communication. What real effects can this have on news coverage or analysis? How do these trends affect the actual content of the media's message?

There are at least six ways in which the present trends in ownership and structure of the mass media can affect the kind of news or programmes we receive.

(i) Obvious conflict of interest or censorship

The first way that the media can be influenced by present trends is the most obvious: through conflict of interest or censorship. Because of the other holdings that a media owner might have, news affecting these other holdings might not appear in the media outlets s/he owns. Here is an example from our region.

On January 6, 1971, a fire and explosion ripped apart the crew's quarters aboard the oil tanker *MV Irvingstream* in the Saint John, N.B. harbour. Five men were killed. The Irving newspaper, the *Telegraph Journal*, said editorially that the cause of the *Irvingstream* disaster was that the federal govern-

ment did not provide sufficient fire boats (even though its own news story reported that the fire chief had ruled out fireboats as a significant factor). An inquest into the accident was held, and the company was accused of negligence. There was no editorial mention of this in the paper. "As far as the casual reader knew, five men had died because Ottawa didn't provide fire boats."

In a presentation to the Senate Committee on the Mass Media, writer and journalist Silver Donald Cameron cited a case where the *Fredericton Gleaner* did not print an investigation of welfare abuses, because the results of the investigation did not jibe with the paper's policy. Other cases of accidents and pollution caused by Irving interests have not been covered by Irving's media.

From the national media, a rather telling example of manipulation can be found in the *Toronto Globe and Mail's* selective editing of an important book review. The book in question was *The Canadian Corporate Elite*. The section of the review dealing with ownership of the media was taken out!

A famous example of interference in the entertainment sphere was the cancellation of a prime-time U.S. comedy and satire programme of the 1960s, *The Smothers Brothers*. The show's hosts took an anti-war stand, and often lampooned the statements of government officials. Despite extremely high ratings and widespread public objections to its being cancelled, the show was summarily taken off the air. The official reason given was minor contract violations and declining popularity. In private, however, a CBS official gave a different reason: "One of them had been sticking his finger in the network's eye and something had to be done."

More recently in the United States, the noted scholars Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman expe-

rienced first-hand what they described as "an authentic instance of private censorship of ideas". Their book, which finally appeared in 1979, had had 20,000 copies printed in 1973, but at the last minute publishers recalled the book, even though a full-page ad for it had been placed in the *New York Review of Books*. Printed flyers that listed the monograph as one of the publisher's titles were destroyed, and officers of the company were told that distribution of the recalled book would result in their immediate dismissal. The publisher, Warner Books, had decided that the meticulously documented publication, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* was "unpatriotic". The authors noted with irony that the same publishers had pleaded "freedom of the press" in justifying the promotion of former President Nixon's memoirs of illegalities and corruption. The authors comment:

The uniqueness of the episode lies only in the manner of suppression. Usually private intervention in the book market is anticipatory, with regrets that the manuscript is unacceptable, perhaps 'unmarketable'.

In Canada, Ian Adam's best-selling novel, *A Portrait of a Spy*, was only re-released in 1981, after a three-year period when the book was kept off the market. Though the book was fiction, the threat of a libel suit had had the effect of censorship, the publishers withdrawing it themselves.

(ii) Vulnerability to influence from advertisers

Another way the content of the media can be influenced or distorted is through the influence of advertisers. The Senate Committee report tells of a

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