

Though it will be apparent to those who read its pages that this is a pre-eminently Canadian document, we make no apology for beginning with a statement by a distinguished American jurist. Justice Hugo Black, in a case involving the right of newspapers to news, wrote that "the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public . . . a free press is a condition of a free society."¹

This notion is basic to our idea of a free society. The more separate voices we have telling us what's going on, telling us how we're doing, telling us how we *should* be doing, the more effectively we can govern ourselves. In this sense, the mass media are society's suggestion box. The more suggestions there are from below, the better will be the decisions made at the top. This assumption is not limited to parliamentary democracies. The desire to have a voice in ordering the institutions that govern our lives is a universal human constant, from classroom to corporation, from neighbourhood to empire. And in a technological society, the media are one of the chief instruments by which this need is met.

The big trouble with this assumption, the notion that media diversity equals a higher polity, is that it happens to be in flat defiance of economics. More voices may be healthier, but fewer voices are cheaper.

There is an apparently irresistible tendency, which the economists describe as the process of "natural monopoly," for the print and electronic media to merge into larger and larger economic units. The tendency is encouraged by the Canadian tax system, in particular the application of death duties, to the point that the president of Southam Press Ltd. predicted to the Committee: ". . . it seems apparent that small and medium-sized newspapers will in the long run pass from individual ownership . . . all existing

¹ *Associated Press v. United States*, 326 U.S. 1, 20 [1944].