

What hope is there for local/independent media?



Oprah's latest Book Club selection is *Cane River* by Lalita Tademy. Sales are sure to be brisk. *Cane River* is a product of AOL Time Warner, the conglomerate that owns online services, movie studios, television channels, magazines, music labels, sports teams and, yes, book publishers. Potentially, the book will be made into a Warner Brothers movie, glowingly reviewed in *Time*, its sound track available on Atlantic Records, with its own chat site online and the opening night celebrations taped for a TV show on HBO—a cross-promotional extravaganza. Every enthusiastic reader will be just one more shill for the marketing machine. This is the hegemony of hype, and jeopardy for journalism. Is the AOL Time Warner journalist assigned to *Cane River* free to say anything true about it?

Convergence and concentration of ownership are part of the media universe in Canada also. Bell Canada Enterprises owns Sympatico, CTV and *The Globe and Mail*. CanWest Global owns Internet portals, film production companies, a television network and newspapers across the country—including the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal*. Can we assume that this will have no impact on how well these papers serve their local communities?

The communications media—newspapers, television, radio, movies, magazines and the Internet—have a powerful influence on our opinions and attitudes. We are shaped by the stories we're told and the information we're given. In simpler times Canadians were united by Wayne and Shuster, *The Plouffe Family*, and *This Hour Has Seven Days*. Now we live in a fragmented and bewildering multi-channel universe. Now, this hour has 22 minutes.

David Taras in *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media* argues that “the media are failing to provide the intellectual sus-

tenance our society needs.” We're served up a diet of *Frasier* and *Friends*. Even though Canada's broadcasting infrastructure belongs to all of us and the CRTC is supposed to grant licences to broadcasters on the condition that they serve the people of Canada (by providing Canadian programming dealing with Canadian concerns, using Canadian talent), there is very little about us in our media. Private broadcasters can buy American shows off the shelf much more cheaply than they can produce Canadian programs.

Meanwhile the CBC, our public broadcaster, has its budget cut. Since its establishment in 1936 the CBC has played an important role in forging a unique Canadian identity and a shared culture. If we lose the CBC, what happens to the public life of the country? If we become mere consumers of a homogenized global culture, what happens to our own creativity?

In this issue of *AlbertaViews* we look at the local communications media, A-Channel and CKUA, and at our book publishing industry. Fortunately we have book publishers in Alberta who are committed to a local culture. They struggle to survive while providing us with the significant work of our own writers. We have CKUA radio, a provincial treasure, once publicly funded and now “one bad fundraiser away from disaster,” but still vital, still connecting us with our own music. And we have A-Channel, holding out the promise of being independent and local, but seemingly unable to attract the audience it needs.

The media affect us, yes, but we also affect them. We can switch channels, or turn them off. We can choose which media we'll pay attention to. And as citizens we can insist on public support for our own local and national media.

Jackie Haragan