

Are our newspapers betraying us?

Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media

by David Taras

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Reviewed by Larry Johnsrude



Media watcher David Taras has written a final chapter for his prophetic book *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media* reinforcing

his point that concentration of media ownership stifles the free market of ideas and therefore is not good for democracy.

In the original edition, published in 1999, Taras sounded alarms about the large number of media outlets owned by a few wealthy and powerful individuals. His favourite target was media baron Conrad Black, whose ownership of Southam and Hollinger newspaper chains and his flagship *National Post* gave him control of 60 of Canada's 105 daily newspapers, accounting for 43 per cent of all circulation in Canada.

If Taras had reason for concern then, he believes he has more so now as a result of CanWest Global's takeover last year of Southam, Hollinger and 50 per cent of the *National Post* in the name of convergence.

"The question raised by Conrad Black's foray into Canadian newspaper business was whether too much power rested in too few hands," he writes in the updated edition, which consists of a new chapter analysing

the CanWest-Southam takeover and other media mergers. "Convergence has, if anything, compounded and deepened the problem. Global's takeover of Black's holdings give Global extraordinary power in most media markets."

Although the stunning takeover of Black's media empire was the most dramatic media acquisition last year, equally profound were telephone giant BCE's purchase of CTV and *The Globe and Mail*, and Quebecor's acquisition of the *Sun* newspaper chain, Quebec broadcaster TVA and cable company Groupe Vidéotron.

Taras, a political scientist from the University of Calgary who has done extensive research on how the media influence public opinion, finds the dominance of communications conglomerates troubling because it limits the forums available for the free exchange of ideas that challenge the status quo.

His book is an exhaustive look at the effect the concentration of media ownership has on the dissemination of news and opinions that shape the way Canadians live, entertain themselves, buy consumer goods and choose their political leaders.

Refreshingly, he doesn't see conspiracies behind every headline, like so many self-appointed media critics who interpret innocuous nuances and measure column inches to support their theories of victimhood. For the most part, he's sympathetic to journalists and understands that most of what appears in newspapers and on radio and television is driven by events rather than partisan preferences.

He finds that bias in the media is

more subtle. He cites a trend towards hiring right-wing newspaper columnists and commentators to promote a conservative political and corporate agenda, which he argues stifles and marginalizes those who don't share the same views. (Ironically, he is an oft-quoted commentator himself.) A more disturbing tendency, he says, is for journalists to self-censor when they work for a fearsome "political warrior" like Black.

Interestingly, in his new chapter on the CanWest Global takeover, Taras doesn't sound the same alarm over CanWest boss Izzy Asper's well-known Liberal connections. That is unfortunate. Isn't Liberal bias in the media just as undesirable as conservative bias?

Still, he makes a convincing argument that the string of media buyouts further blurs the lines between journalism, entertainment and corporate interests. And while the Internet remains a frontier for the unimpeded flow of thought and opinion, most people still get their news and base their opinions on what they read in the newspapers and hear and see on radio and television, which in Taras's mind are becoming increasingly suspect.

Larry Johnsrude has worked in newspapers for more than 25 years. His first newspaper job was the *Kimberley Daily Bulletin* in Kimberley, B.C., shortly after it was purchased by Conrad Black's Sterling Newspapers as part of his early media acquisitions. Johnsrude spent 10 years with the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* and was with the Canadian Press for nine years, both in Edmonton and in Ottawa. After five years as the *Edmonton Journal's* Legislature Bureau Chief he is now a senior political writer for the *Journal*.

A newspaperman reviews a critique of the media, and its author responds with advice for newspapers

Newspapers: Rumours of their death may be exaggerated, but...

by David Taras



Newspapers are in trouble. While they are not about to be relegated to the trash heaps of history, their readership has been on a downward slope for quite some time. The skid has been particularly evident among young people, who are reading newspapers much less frequently than their parents did when they were the same age.

People now have many more outlets to turn to for their basic news diets: 24-hour news, sports, business and weather channels, a flood of weekly and monthly magazines, the cranky world of talk radio, and of course, the endless kaleidoscope of the Internet. Moreover our increasingly frantic and hurried lifestyles have also taken a toll on newspaper readership.

Indeed the great value of newspaper reading is that it represents a peaceful respite from the daily grind and a chance to catch up. But for many people, finding the time has become difficult.

In the long run, however, the major challenge to newspapers will come from the Internet. First, the economic engine of the newspaper business—want ads, the classifieds and advertising for sports events, entertainment and city events—may be stalled by the increasing availability of on-line

services in these areas. Readers can also access newspapers for free and not have to pay the costs of a subscription.

On a deeper level it is the fact that almost all media will be available through the Internet that most endangers the newspaper. By logging on one can drink from a news and entertainment cocktail through the combination of text, video and sound that newspapers will have difficulty matching. And young people who have grown up on-line are showing little inclination to switch to newspapers any time soon.

The question is whether newspapers can change in ways that might stem the tide that threatens to drown them. I believe they can.

According to *Washington Post* media maven Howard Kurtz, the light and breezy, feel good, fluffy and less demanding formula that has become the mainstay of many newspapers is failing. He argues that newspapers will have to be more hard hitting, more in touch with their communities and have a bit of the hell raiser in them if they are to retain the hearts, let alone the serious attention, of their readers.

I'm not sure Kurtz is entirely right. Reading newspapers doesn't have to be the daily equivalent of flossing your teeth: an experience you don't enjoy even if you know it's good for you. Newspapers should include tasty human-interest stories, colourful pictures and the zesty morsels of everyday life. They need to make us laugh. Celebrity news and splashy stories have their value.

But there is little doubt that news-

papers will have to get closer to their communities if they want to maintain the loyalty of their readers. Here are some suggestions. Why not invite informed members of the community to an editorial board meeting and have them write about how they see the issues? Why not shift focus so that health care issues—the number one concern of Canadians—are given a higher priority. Health news is often scattered throughout the newspaper. Why not bring all of the stories together each day in a single page? Why not create a similar page about schools and learning?

I also believe that newspapers should have a crusading spirit. Papers should champion causes and let their readers, and indeed their own journalists, know that they care about the community and want to make a difference. A scrappy, fighting and caring newspaper always makes for interesting reading. But this does not only mean the drumbeat of pontificating journalists—although I strongly believe that pundits serve a valuable purpose by stirring public debate. It also means finding out about the issues that really concern the community and involving citizens in those debates. Why not have special investigative reports and sponsor public meetings on the quality of our public schools? On what to do about long and debilitating waits for medical attention or on why voter turnouts are so low at all levels of politics?

By crusading, however, I do not mean one-sided ideological campaigns. Above all, newspapers have to be a meeting place for the community, a place where the community comes

together and can see its own reflection. In this regard, one-sided journalism and the politics of a single ideological viewpoint ultimately undermine the integrity and the trust on which a newspaper must be based. People know when they are not getting all the information they need.

The *Edmonton Journal* and indeed the other major newspapers in the

province have many fine journalists on their staffs. Writers such as Larry Johnsrude make enormous contributions to their communities. But the sheer force of competition and the advent of new technologies may dictate much of the future for newspapers. At its very best the newspaper helps people organize their day and gives them a way of connecting with

the world. If newspapers fail to make these connections themselves then rumors of their death may not be exaggerated.

David Taras is a professor in the Faculty of Communication and Culture at the University of Calgary. He is the author of *The Newsmakers: The Media's Influence on Canadian Politics* and co-editor of *Seeing Ourselves: Media Power and Policy in Canada*.

Excerpt from *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media*

by David Taras

Why did Black suddenly leave all that he had built up in Canada over the period of the last 20 years? In a requiem to Conrad Black published in *The Globe and Mail*, Doug Saunders catalogued both the lavish scale and deep fervour that characterized Black's commitment to the *National Post* in particular. The paper had reportedly lost close to \$99-million in its first 21 months, due in part to the large infusion of cash needed to create a new national newspaper from scratch.

But the paper also had a heady, self-indulgent style. It hired a cohort of highly priced columnists and spent lavishly on headline-grabbing investigative pieces. As Saunders observed: "It had been two years of excess, unlimited spending, untamed innovation and ideological revolution, an ebullient explosion that had altered the media forever."

Its effects could be felt on a number of levels. First, the launch of the new paper started a circulation war that threatened and weakened *The Globe and Mail*. *Globe* readership has declined from 2.34 million people who read an issue of the paper during an average week in 1997 to 2.29 million in 2000. One can argue that the competition between the two national papers gave Canadians greater choice and ultimately made the *Globe* a better paper. The *Globe* was forced to recruit a new generation of writers and lost some of its stodgy conservatism.

Second, the *Post* brought a new European style to Canadian journalism: writing and headlines that were splashy, crusading, opinionated, and overtly ideological. To some degree the *Post* became both a catalyst and a cheerleader for the emergence of the Canadian Alliance

Party, an intervention into national life that is almost unprecedented for a newspaper in the post-war era. The *Post* also created a news hierarchy within the Southam chain. Big city dailies such as the *Calgary Herald* or the *Montreal Gazette* would feed regional stories to the *Post* but were also relegated to a kind of farm team status where they would have to play second fiddle on big national stories "owned" by the *Post*.

There was every reason to believe that Conrad Black had relished his role as the creator of the *Post* and as the most influential newspaper owner in the country. His many speeches, columns, and pronouncements seemed to suggest a man comfortable with his immense power and with his own dedication and prescriptions for righting the wrongs of Canadian journalism and politics. In what seemed like a final goodbye to Canada, Black wrote a "comment" that was published in Southam newspapers soon after the sale was announced. He pointed out that Hollinger was carrying a sizable debt load and that the company had been too heavily invested in Canada considering the opportunities that existed elsewhere. His retreat was a business decision, a strategic

withdrawal, rather than a loss of heart or an indication of personal difficulties. Black could not resist taking a last swipe at those who were gleefully cheering his departure:

"I do not choose to reply to those who in the last week have likened me to a jackal, claimed that I have left no legacy in Canada and that I stripped little newspapers to feed large ones, declared that I have never added value to any company I was head of, or am guilty of the vast catalogue of Kafkaesque shortcomings that has been alleged against me by my self-declared enemies in the Canadian media.

"The authors of these lies and smears illustrate perfectly... all the weaknesses of the country and of the journalistic craft that I have often addressed before."

