



THE SLIPPING NEWS

Are Alberta's two big dailies telling you what you need to know?

by Lisa Gregoire

Six months before the June 2002 G8 summit in Kananaskis, a half dozen reporters at the *Edmonton Journal* started excitedly trading story ideas. It may sound pathetic but reporters do get excited about these things. As Canada's largest and most expensive peacetime security operation ever—and the first gathering of world leaders after September 11, 2001—the summit posed innumerable political, social and logistical questions. More than anything, I wanted to be on it.

I spent days researching past summits and compiling a network of contacts from bureaucrats to anti-G8 activists. I monitored preview coverage in the pro-establishment *Calgary Herald* as it swung wildly between protest fear mongering, the Kananaskis army fortress and the potential for Calgary businesses to cash in. I urged my bosses to assemble a *Journal* team to deliver a more thoughtful, in-depth package, but under the new CanWest Global Communications Corp. policy of “synergy,” Calgary would cover the event for the entire newspaper chain. Efficiency trumped diversity. Besides, one editor told me, readers weren't interested.

Weeks before the summit, I convinced my bosses to let me go but was told to write only features about people in our coverage area. More importantly, I was to cover the “riots” (which, despite dozens of breathless *Herald* stories, never materialized).

I soon cursed my obstinacy. My stories were hacked and buried in the back pages. One story was missing altogether. After a little prying, I learned the piece had been deemed “left-wing propaganda” by a senior editor and pulled. It was an article about the crossroads of religion and activism in Calgary, focusing on a Grande Prairie Christian group raising awareness about poverty and unfair trade in Africa. I admit it was a little heavy on peace and love and didn't quote any pro-poverty atheists. But what about the *Journal's* Business front story on Vanilla Coke 10 days earlier or the countless government press releases posing as news stories which ran without context or counter opinions? My boss shrugged. As an 11-year veteran, I was expected to meet a higher standard, she said. I think she was trying to make me feel better but double standards never do. That day I started planning my departure.

THE EDMONTON JOURNAL, which turned 100 in 2003, employs some of the most talented news people in Canada. Writers Ed Struzik, Chuck Rusnell, Chris Purdy and Rick McConnell, photographers Chris Schwarz, Brian Gavrilloff and Bruce Edwards, columnists Graham Thomson, Dan Barnes and Paula Simons and many exceptional editors and designers lead one of the strongest *Journal* teams ever. Despite that, some engaged readers have noticed a decline in the breadth and depth of news coverage and a slow creep of Global TV marketing.

Retired reporter and radio consumer advocate Eddie Keen says that, barring a few notable exceptions, the *Journal* spends too much time waiting for news to happen and reacting rather than distilling the issues of the day and coming up with original, provocative stories. It's clearly a quality paper, he says, but local coverage is too safe. "The media have great opportunities to make social change but they don't do it," says Keen. "Every paper with a circulation the size of the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Calgary Herald* should have an investigative team of at least three reporters who could spend months working on a story."

Bob Beale, who worked for the *Herald* and the *Journal* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is a self-described media junkie who now teaches Canadian history at Athabasca University. "The *Calgary Herald* has gone way down hill. Perhaps we look back fondly, with nostalgia, but I think we worked harder on stories," he says. "The problem I see now is that reporting and writing is more superficial than it used to be."

Most news people won't divulge publicly the arbitrary decisions, political squabbles and tongue-biting which occur so history can be crudely recorded in 60-odd pages of newsprint every day. It's considered indecent. But Sydney Schanberg, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning American journalist whose book inspired the movie *The Killing Fields*, thinks newspapers should pry open dark closets to earn back readers and public trust. "Stop ducking the central issue, the fact that we the press hold accountable every profession, pressure group, institution, and constituency except one: ourselves. We present ourselves as society's watchdog, but we refuse to watch over our own lapses and abuses," he wrote in 2000. "If we really want to restore our credibility, we will have to look at ourselves and do it in public."

So let's have a look-see.

Something has changed at the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Calgary Herald* and dozens of Albertans interviewed for this story—politicians, bureaucrats, media critics, journalism professors, lawyers, librarians, writers and academics as well as current and former news staff—offer opinions on what's missing and why. Stories are hackneyed and uninspired, they say. Staffers shift the blame, arguing that with fewer resources and less space, editors turn to press releases and wire stories instead of assigning risky, expensive investigative projects. It's the constricted media climate in Alberta, suggest political types. Thirty years of Tory derision have stifled the will and creativity of reporters, prompting surrender to the status

quo. Still others blame CanWest and the Asper family—the owners of Global TV who bought the *Herald* and *Journal* as part of Conrad Black's newspaper chain in 2000—for dumping down the news.

Maybe they're all right. One thing's for sure: the vocabulary of journalism is changing. In speeches by CanWest executives to business lobby groups, news stories are called "content," writers are "content producers" and readers are "niche markets." CanWest publishers named within the past two years like longtime *Herald* staffer Peter Menzies and James Orban of the *Ottawa Citizen* are now called general managers.

"Freedom of the press has turned out to mean, in the real world, control of the mainstream press by a small number of oligarchs," Ronnie Dugger, founding editor of the irreverent and award-winning independent weekly *Texas Observer*, wrote in his recent essay "The Corporate Domination of Journalism." He continues: "Freedom of the press has been upside-downed into corporate control of the press, which is no more freedom of the press than government control is."

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CORPORATE CONTROL FOR THE ASPERS has meant delivering their anti-Arab, anti-Muslim message to a larger audience, alienating local groups and drawing a dozen complaints to the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission against the *Journal* and CanWest. Complainants allege specific editorials and news stories preached hate and discrimination. Edmontonian James Darwish launched his complaint in November 2001 after reading stories which quoted incendiary anti-Palestinian speeches of the late patriarch Israel Asper. The other 11 complaints, lodged in 2002, come from Arab groups like Edmonton's Canadian-Arab Professional Business Club. As of April, none of those complaints had been resolved.

Once loyal subscribers, many of Alberta's 50,000 Muslims and others of Middle Eastern descent have stopped reading the *Journal*. Lawyer Bob Aloneissi, Edmonton-born of Lebanese parents, has a framed picture of Wayne Gretzky in his office and another of him and his brother Mayher at Klondike Days. "I was so disappointed," says Aloneissi. "You expect so much more when you grow up with the *Journal*. Everyone realizes it's a business. But it's like the law. Law is a business but there are obligations and responsibilities."

Publisher Linda Hughes knows the paper has hurt Arab readers, especially with “Apocalyptic Creed,” an April 2002 editorial penned at CanWest headquarters in Winnipeg which all member papers were forced to run. The *Journal* ran angry letters for weeks and encourages members of the Arab and Muslim community to write op-ed responses when they feel wronged. “Maybe that’s unfair of us because these people aren’t in the business of writing,” says Hughes. “But certainly that offer stands. And we’d like to think that since that editorial, we have taken care and we haven’t had any complaints, I believe, since that time.”

Two national studies of media concentration—the Senate Special Committee on Mass Media in 1970 and the Royal Commission on Newspapers in 1980—predicted these conflicts. Both concluded media monopolies lead to a limited spectrum of opinions and voices and were therefore inherently contrary to the public interest. The senate committee report held that “this country should no longer toler-

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ate a situation where the public interest, in so vital a field as information, is dependent on the greed or goodwill of an extremely privileged group of businessmen.” Warnings went unheeded. Leap forward to 2002 and repeat. After CanWest perturbed readers and newspaper staff by forcing its member dailies to run national editorials, a group of senators announced another study on media concentration. The Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications has been conducting hearings since April 2003. Meanwhile, CanWest, Canada’s largest media conglomerate, is \$3-billion in debt and window shopping for radio stations and billboard companies to expand its “media platform” and enlarge its “aggregate audience.”

David McKie, CBC Radio reporter and editor of the Canadian Association of Journalists’ *Media* magazine, says media convergence can be smart business. With fewer bodies and smaller budgets, CBC TV and CBC Radio are sharing resources more than ever, to great advantage. Linda Hughes, who is also head of CanWest media operations in Alberta, says Global TV and provincial newspapers have benefited greatly from sharing stories and contacts. But, says McKie, newspapers risk losing readers if they mistake marketing for editorial policy. “The feeling among some is that convergence is a handy-dandy way to recycle the same material and cross-promote,” he says. Russell Mills, the former *Ottawa Citizen* publisher fired for running stories and editorials critical of Jean Chrétien before vetting them first

with the Aspers, says convergence could compromise objectivity. Broadcasters are regulated by government through the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission and therefore rely on the government for licence renewal. That could influence how a media company reports on government in its newspapers, he says.

THE *JOURNAL* HAS NEVER BEEN a government cheerleader. In the late 1930s, with fascism beating the drums of the Second World War, it fought to preserve democracy at home. Leading a group of five dailies and 90 weeklies, the *Journal* took on Premier William Aberhart and his Accurate News and Information Act which would have given the Social Credit government significant control over newspaper content. The Supreme Court of Canada ruled the Act unconstitutional in 1938. Two months later, the *Journal* received a bronze plaque from the Pulitzer Prize committee. Then-publisher John Imrie accepted the honour in New York with a stirring promise: “Humbly, but without fear, not for ourselves alone but for our province, not simply for the press as such but for democracy, we will continue with unabated vigour, without equivocation or surrender, and notwithstanding whatever sacrifice may be involved, the struggle to preserve inviolate in Alberta those fundamentals of liberty and freedom that are the common and glorious heritage of your people and of mine.”

Such a proud pedigree for a paper that spent two years covering *Survivor* like a news story. Last January, a story on colds and flu ran in the front news section of the *Journal* above a half page ad for Neo Citran. CanWest calls these “adjacency ads” and plans to link stories and ads more often to boost ad sales. Some staffers, wary of advertisers dictating editorial content, find this deceitful to readers and embarrassing. Equally embarrassing for some was editor-in-chief Giles Gherson’s regular trips to the legislature to make friends with Ralph Klein and his ministers. (Gherson has since left the *Journal* for *The Globe and Mail*.) Gherson was guest speaker at a government luncheon for media relations officers in the summer of 2002, where he announced that the *Journal* wanted to work with government, that it was no longer the opposition, a reference to former *Journal* publisher Patrick O’Callaghan. After the Tories won 74 of 79 seats in 1979, O’Callaghan proclaimed the *Journal* would serve as an unelected opposition, unleashing years of zealous political reporting.

“The quality of journalism is ridiculous in this province. It’s so sad,” says a Tory staffer who was told to treat the *Journal*’s then-legislative bureau chief Tom Olsen as though he were part of the Public Affairs Bureau. “There’s no continuity, no institutional memory. We used to worry about what the *Journal* had in the paper every morning. We don’t worry about the *Journal* anymore. We don’t worry about any media.”

That’s obvious to people like George Oake, a retired newsman who worked for the CBC and numerous newspapers including the *Edmonton Journal*, where he was managing editor until losing his job in 1989. “It’s a very special

kind of business,” he says about newspapers. “There’s a public trust there. People look for information, entertainment and the truth—some sort of truth. And they look for some kind of debate. I don’t see that anymore.” The *Journal* has become like a service club for the affluent and powerful, he says, at the expense of average readers. “They don’t want to offend anyone anymore. Why? What’s their problem? They don’t want to interrupt their revenue stream.”

Some say O’Callaghan went too far crusading against government. Most reporters, even those who admired his tenacity, cringed when he made his opposition remark. “The paper was a Tory-bashing paper and it was very one-sided. I think we were biased. That’s not a way to win trust with readers,” said a *Journal* source, adding the “good old days” in the 1980s were fraught with male chauvinism, shouting matches and excessive drinking on the job. “We had capricious, unprofessional management. It was seen to be part of the newspaper culture: take no quarter. It was bad.” Other staffers agreed the newsroom could be rank, but their respect for O’Callaghan abides. “You had to hand it to him,” said one. “He took on the establishment. He had guts. In a province like this, the pressure is there to conform.”

Perhaps the pendulum swung too far back with Gherson’s Tory hobnobbing. If he was nurturing policy leaks, it worked. Throughout 2002 and 2003, Tom Olsen consistently got the jump on new government initiatives. But the stories were seldom controversial. Most sounded like Tory trial balloons, unencumbered by opposing views or historical context. Said one *Journal* staffer wryly: “For me, scoops are about getting the stuff government *doesn’t* want you to know.” Outsiders noticed too. Ian MacLaren, a University of Alberta professor of Canadian history and literature, calls the *Journal’s* political coverage “absolutely lamentable. You might as well phone up the government as read the *Journal*. You get the same story.”

A TELLING INDICATOR is the *Journal’s* treatment of the 2002-2003 Auditor General’s report, a comprehensive analysis of government spending. The *Journal* used to cover those reports like a budget, sending out a team of writers and filling pages for days. Last year, editors sent one reporter who wrote one main story and a short sidebar. A column and an editorial followed later.

Alberta Auditor General Fred Dunn, who is appointed by and reports to the legislature as an independent monitor, despairs of how the *Journal* and other media generally ignore the 300-page-plus report once they’ve plucked from it a juicy story or two. Assistant Auditor General Merwan Saher, who has been with the office since 1980, confirmed the *Journal* covers his office far less than it used to. Reporters rarely attend the Standing Committee on Public Accounts either, he said, which features an all-party line-by-line examination of departmental spending. “How would the average member of the public sift through all these reports? That’s what I buy my newspaper for,” says Saher. “I believe the media are an integral part of the accountability process.”



Typesetters at the *Edmonton Journal* in 1919.

So do Canadians, according to a November 2003 Decima poll on attitudes toward Canadian media. Of the 1,014 Canadian adults who responded to statements about the role of newspapers, 85 per cent agreed they represent a window into government to ensure accountability. When asked about media, including broadcasters, 91 per cent said strong media were necessary to keep government accountable.

Olsen has since left the *Journal* for the *Herald* and Hughes expects incoming legislative bureau chief James Baxter to carve a new path. “I’m hoping we get good, strong, in-depth coverage. Depending on how strong the opposition is, I think the government in this province generally does get an easy ride because they have a huge majority. [Opposition MLAs] do their best but they just don’t have the resources and the manpower. When you have a strong opposition, it helps the media do their job better.”

Ex-reporters and editors from the *Calgary Herald*, those who left before and after the 236-day strike in 1999 and 2000, have moved on to other media or to teach young people their craft. Many are still bitter, pointing out stories they say are routinely ignored by the *Herald’s* greenhorns. Some mourn the “paper that was” and pity what it has become. Regardless of the merits of a union, the *Herald* suffered a loss when more than 90 newsroom staff—some of them award-winning writers—left after the strike, taking with them contacts, stories and memories. (*Herald* publisher Peter Menzies was contacted for comment but did not return phone calls. However, in an e-mail exchange last January, Menzies wrote, “Speaking to some ex-*Heralders* can be a bit like asking someone’s ex-husband for a character reference, I’m afraid.” Fair enough.)

Robert Bragg, a reporter, editorial writer and columnist who left the *Calgary Herald* just before the strike, teaches journalism at Mount Royal College. He says local coverage has become trite and forgettable: sports is dominated by

the Calgary Flames; the entertainment section is obsessed with “looking up the skirts of famous actresses” rather than covering the vibrant local arts scene; and city news doesn’t adequately reflect Calgary’s growth and diversity except in boosterism or tokenism. “It’s an embarrassment for a city this size to have a paper this shallow, this out-of-touch with whatever’s going on. . . . They don’t put enough resources into it. They’re scrambling. The variety of voices in the local section is from A to B,” Bragg quips. “You know, it runs the gamut.”

When the *Herald* had beats for the environment, labour, education, health and native issues, reporters were experts in the field, says Gillian Steward, who teaches journalism at the University of Regina and is completing a Master of Communications Studies at the University of Calgary. She was the *Herald*’s managing editor from 1987 to 1990 and a political columnist when she left in 1992. Beat reporters knew the laws, the players, the history and the politics. Their questions to bosses and ministers were intelligent and probing, but most of those beats were dissolved in the late 1990s. “The journalist was holding a person accountable on behalf of the public,” she says. “It becomes easy for people to snow reporters if they have no specialty. Coverage becomes shallow, one-sided.”

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Mark Lowey is one of those award-winning writers who left after the strike. He now publishes *EnviroLine* and contributes to *Business Edge*, a Calgary weekly launched by ex-*Herald* staff. “I always thought words could make a difference and shape a better world,” he says. “I thought words were more than a commodity, different from other goods bought and sold in the marketplace. I think journalism has lost its heart and social conscience. It’s a commodity, just like tin. And it’s produced, just like tin.”

SO WHO CONSUMES THIS NEW COMMODITY? Fewer and fewer people. The *Herald*’s audited circulation numbers for the six months ending September 2003 are among the lowest of Canada’s big dailies. Average daily paid circulation was 116,106 for 384,230 households, meaning fewer than one third of households have a *Herald* subscription. The *Journal*’s average daily circulation for that period was 130,238 in a city with 371,089 households, just slightly above one third penetration. Hughes says *Journal* editors have vowed not to allow circulation to dip any lower and are focusing on attracting young readers with sections like Saturday’s *Ed* magazine.

They have an uphill climb. Newspaper circulation across North America has been dwindling for decades. Market penetration in the 1960s and 1970s hovered around 80 per cent. Television news channels and the Internet have stolen a chunk of traditional readership, people say, and thwarted attempts to build a young audience. But newspapers must not try to imitate new media with “bits of news and random entertainments,” writes newspaper veteran John Miller, the author of *Yesterday’s News: Why Canada’s Daily Newspapers Are Failing Us*. Instead, he says, they should return to telling us why things matter and how they are connected. That’s key. In this era of rapid and disposable information, shouldn’t newspapers fill up those tepid, shallow depths—or at least anchor a story in one place for more than a fleeting moment?

“It was what I wanted to do since I was a kid. I loved writing. I wanted to be a journalist,” says Linda Goyette, an award-winning *Journal* veteran of 20 years. “Watergate happened when I was 13. Journalism was considered a public service. I think it’s a vocation. I would never call it a profession or a trade. It’s something that practically chooses you.” Goyette won the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy in August 2000, a year-long, \$65,000 research and writing grant. She took a leave of absence from the *Journal* to pursue her project—exploring the relationship between First Nations and their Canadian neighbours—then left the *Journal* when it was completed. As newspapers ebb and flow over the years, she thinks the *Journal* and the *Herald* are in a still receding ebb, having sacrificed independence and vigilance. But it’s only temporary. She knows the same passion that pulled her into journalism will continue drawing young, fearless writers to pick up where she left off. “I have faith that newspapers will honour their values again.”

Gillian Steward fears not for the future of journalism. She senses a movement among her young recruits. More skilled than ever and smarter, they understand the constraints of mainstream media and some are responding by changing the shape and delivery of news through alternative means. “We’re in a transition phase, an extended phase, because so many things have happened with ownership and convergence. I actually feel optimistic about it. I think eventually we will see new kinds of publications emerge, combinations of print and electronic media,” she says. “I think it’s naturally going to evolve because there’s such a vacuum for local news. Whenever you pull out and create a vacuum someone comes in to fill it.”

But I don’t pin my hopes on a bunch of badly dressed reporters. I pin them on readers. In my experience, nothing spurs change like a call to the editor or a spate of letters. Freedom of the press is not bestowed on corporations. It is a right of individuals, protected in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. If something grabs you, bores you, angers you or inspires you, pick up the phone or write a letter. It’s not their paper. It’s yours. 

Lisa Gregoire is an Edmonton-based freelance writer and former reporter with the *Edmonton Journal*. She is still badly dressed.