

How I Learned to Stop Worrying (and Love the Media)



When considering a topic like media, the question is whether to attack or defend. The urge to attack comes from the many things that appear in the press on a daily basis and drive me bonkers.

For example: When the sports scribe at the *Herald* uses a portion of almost every column he writes to launch another justification for trading my favourite Calgary Flames player.

Or: When I read about “a senseless act of violence.” Compared to what, I always wonder. All the really sensible acts of violence going on out there?

Then there is: The nation’s broadcasting corporation, which, on its

radio side, has decided not to promote Canadian books to the same extent as it used to—*except*, of course, if they are books written by their own salaried on-air employees, who are already getting many hours of free national publicity every week as it is. (You might recognize this as envy. I want in on it, or I want it stopped.)

Finally: My greatest irritation is with newspaper columnists paid by the column inch to rant, but who always, always, seem to detest the things I approve of. For example, the paid ranters hate people who make things like movies, books and television shows, particularly the ones who

get government money “to make smut!” Currently on television is a program about bondage. Apparently, it receives some Canadian Television Fund dollars. One of the local ranters has been foaming about this lately. This fellow cannot get over the advanced age of the people with the masks and whips, and the sad condition of their flesh. I guess he likes his porn straight up: nice young folks doing top-10 sex acts with people of the same age and opposite gender. No funny stuff!

And of course the paid ranters are in agreement on the environment. Trash the damn thing! Clear cut it.

Drill it full of holes and gas it. When there's a choice of weapon, strip mine it. And if a bunch of caribou habitually have their babies above a potentially lucrative oil field, don't go soft, don't get sentimental. Drive them out! Shoot them if they won't go! Get drilling!

Not surprisingly, their opinion of environmentalists is not all that thumbs-up either. They like to portray them as quaint old hippies in peasant dresses and hair shirts, or as effete rural coupon-cutters who have never worked (unlike the brawny ingot-smelting likes of themselves).

BUT JUST WHEN the media really has me tearing my hair, something shows up in the press that reminds me that the media is, after all, *the only place where I find things out.*

I had such a day in January this year, when my newspaper contained two stories about the traditional right of journalists to keep their sources secret. The cover story described the invasion of Juliet O'Neill's house. For five hours, the RCMP combed the home of the *Ottawa Citizen* reporter, looking for the name of her informant on a story she had written about Maher Arar. As I'm sure you know, Arar is the Canadian who the Americans sent to Syria to be jailed and, according to him, tortured. Because the information in her story about Arar had come from a government security file, the RCMP wanted the source of the leak. Upholding the tradition of confidentiality, O'Neill would not tell them. So they threatened her with charges and milled through her underwear drawer. In the end, they took her address books and her Rolodex, in which almost certainly some of her sources were named, if not on this story, then others.

The same day, in the same paper several pages back, was the result of a legal fight between the *National Post* and the Government of Canada, again regarding protection of sources. During "Shawinigate," the *Post* received leaked information on the Prime Minister's personal relationship to a hotel in his riding that he may

have been helping lobby for government funds. The government sent the Mounties over to find out who had leaked the information, so they would know who to tar and feather and run out of Ottawa. And the *Post* would not tell. The newspaper story contained the outcome of the subsequent court case. The Supreme Court of Ontario had found in favour of the *National Post*. The Chief Justice said that a journalist's protection of sources was "an entrenched constitutional right."

Though the content of these two stories is important, the point for my purposes is that the two items were reported upon so quickly and completely. As a citizen, I was notified of an infringement of rights by our government and police, and of a potential protection against that infringement in future. Media in a democracy: isn't it lovely?

IF THERE IS any remaining doubt about what happens when media have no access, when there is no leak, consider the events of July 1945. That month and year, Canadian soldiers were asked to take part in a test at Suffield. They were offered extra leave and extra pay, and were sworn to secrecy. Then they were taken to a field where bombs landed around them, releasing mustard gas. They had to crawl through bomb craters full of this gas, and their exposed skin was burned to the extent of producing tennis-ball-sized blisters. A few days later, they were made to do it again.

There was no media leak, and the men, being good soldiers, lived by their oath. The guinea pigs suffered various health effects over the years, and some no doubt died of them. But did the military or our government ever feel the need to tell us about it? No. Not once in over 50 years. The only way we know is that someone finally did tell a reporter, and the reporter told us. 📖

Fred Stenson has written more than 130 produced films and videos, and more than a dozen books of fiction and non-fiction.

NUMBERS SOURCES



Line

- 1 Canadian Newspaper Association; Alberta Weekly Newspapers Association
- 2 CNA
- 3 Calculated from statistics provided by CNA
- 4 Calculated from statistics provided by CNA
- 5 Glenbow Museum
- 6 The Edmonton Journal
- 7-8 CNA
- 9-11 Decima
- 12 First-hand research
- 13 Business Plus Online
- 14-15 Association for Canadian Studies
- 16-17 Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting
- 18 Centre for Research and Information on Canada
- 19-20 Common knowledge
- 21 Jeremy Lott
- 22 Common knowledge
- 23 Government of British Columbia
- 24 Statistics Canada
- 25 workopolis.com
- 26-27 keywordsfinder.com
- 28-29 Harvard Law School

MAR/APR ACROSTIC SOLUTION

Helen Forrester
Latchkey Kid

The big oil strike had been responsible for an upheaval in the existing order, and the fight for social status—before a fixed pecking order could be reestablished—was waged in every drawing room, church hall and charitable institution

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|---------------------|-----------------------|
| A Hobble | N Robertson |
| B Estonia | O Let It Bleed |
| C Lighthouse | P Assign |
| D Extension | Q Timed |
| E Nassau | R Clapping |
| F Fibonacci | S Hideous |
| G Orchard | T King Arthur |
| H Rife | U Edition |
| I Redwater | V Yellow fever |
| J Ed Harris | W Kandahar |
| K Space | X Ill behaved |
| L Turbot | Y DW Griffith |
| M Exchange | |

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