

**Family vs. Corporate Ownership:*****The London Free Press During and After the Blackburns***

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In the mid-size Ontario town of London, the local daily is *The London Free Press*. Owned by the same family for almost a century and a half, it was sold in 1997 to a large corporation, Sun Media (which itself was subsequently purchased by Quebecor Inc. in 1999). Predictably, there was local academic and community concern about, and interest in, the sale of one of Canada's last independent newspapers to a chain. As journalism professors at The University of Western Ontario with a proprietary interest in our local paper, as well as devoted readers of the *Free Press* for many years, we were especially curious about what the sale might mean and how a change of ownership would or would not affect our news coverage.

From a small sample reading of the paper from both 1995 and 2000, it seemed to us that the paper under the Blackburn family was a vastly different one from that produced in the millennium year under its corporate owner. We decided to examine the paper in a more rigorous manner through a limited exploratory case study in order to determine if our initial impressions were correct. Beginning with a narrowly defined content analysis, then exploring and broadening our limited numerical findings through interviews with journalists and media management, this undertaking suggests that changes in newspaper ownership do affect the product, the newspaper itself, and the morale of the journalists who produce it. Through the quantitative approach, we found a

statistically significant difference in both the size of the space devoted to locally generated coverage, known in the field as the news hole, and in the amount of locally written stories vs. wire coverage in the two years we compared: the news hole was shrinking and the amount of wire copy was on the rise. The question, however, of how to interpret these numbers not only from the readership's perspective, but from that of the actual newsroom, also needed some exploration. To this end, we discussed our findings with four current or former *Free Press* employees. While our remarks are tentative and limited, both the numbers and the interview material do offer possibilities for further research to better understand the intersection of newspaper ownership, newsroom management and both the quality and quantity of news in the paper itself.

### **Literature Review**

Initially, we were interested in whether or not the situation at *The London Free Press* was a microcosm of the much larger national and even North American-wide phenomenon of small papers being bought up by large media conglomerates, and the somewhat related situation of towns that previously had two competing newspapers suffering the closure of one because of corporate ownership shifts. In Canada, while there are no content analyses of *The London Free Press* specifically, there are a few quantitative studies that have measured what occurs in Canadian papers in either the former or the latter situation. James P. Winter and Dores A. Candussi in their 1988 article, "Monopoly and Content in Winnipeg," used a quantitative approach to consider the 1980 situation in Winnipeg when a dominant Canadian newspaper chain closed one of the papers in the city, leaving the *Winnipeg Free Press* with a monopoly on coverage.

They concluded that the monopoly situation adversely affected what readers receive, citing less national and international coverage and a smaller news hole as undesirable changes (144). Robert A. Hackett and Scott Uzelman (2003) in “Tracing Corporate Influences on Press Content: a Summary of Recent NewsWatch Canada Research” offered the findings of 17 content analyses conducted by senior undergraduate students focusing on the “impact of media ownership concentration and other aspects of corporate power” (332). While their studies were small in scope, their results were cumulative and suggested, among other things, that newspapers tend to be less critical of parent companies than do papers with outside ownership; that newspapers tend to downplay the media industry itself as an interest group, political or otherwise; and that editorial stance, largely determined by ownership, influences news coverage (342). Jim McKenzie’s piece, “Content Analysis of the Regina Leader-Post under Hollinger Ownership,” prepared for the Council of Canadians in 1996, concluded that corporate owner Conrad Black’s “strategy is to gut the newsroom, provide low-cost, low-quality news content, and rake in the profits” (11).

In terms of Canadian explorations of family ownership specifically, Kathy Lynn English’s master’s thesis, “Family Ties and Chains of Ownership: The Expositor from Thomas Hiram Preston to Conrad Moffat Black,” discussed the community connections Preston clearly embraced in running his paper. Similarly, Michael Nolan’s book, *Walter J. Blackburn: A Man for all Media*, made clear that Walter Blackburn felt strong paternalistic connections to the London community in which he grew up, and tried to reflect his readership’s concerns in the pages of *The London Free Press*. While obviously

the bottom line is of concern to all newspaper owners, making money was neither Walter Blackburn's sole nor primary interest.

These books and articles are set against the background of the findings of two well-known Canadian documents, Senator Keith Davey's 1970 *Special Senate Report on Newspapers*, and the 1981 *Royal Commission on Newspapers*, chaired by Thomas Kent. While neither these government-inspired studies nor the group of books and articles advances a uni-dimensional or simplistic view of the press, and all recognize to a greater or lesser extent that media coverage is subject to multiple influences, the prevailing sentiment of the majority of this literature is that corporate ownership is "bad" and locally owned, family-run businesses are "good": "Unlike the family-run newspapers of yesteryear, the chains of today (many of which have monopoly cities as their preserve) focus on the bottom line" (Candussi & Winter, 140). While initially the findings of our own small study seemed to support this hypothesis, again we were curious. Was there more? How could we best augment our findings?

As Hackett and Uzelman (and Hackett himself writing earlier) contend, content analysis as a research approach is useful to test hypotheses and draw inferences, but a number of scholars have also pointed out both epistemological and methodological limitations of this approach. Hackett and Uzelman suggest that content analysis is "best when supplemented by qualitative discourse analysis and contextual research" (332). Broadening this idea, Candussi and Winter urge Canadian researchers to be wary of the limitations of the quantitative approach. "There is a great need for monopoly studies which include intensive interviews with journalists and other professionals about qualitative changes, to supplement studies such as this one" (145). To date, there are no

Canadian studies, short or long, that offer interview material from journalists, editors or other news professionals about how they see, or would explain, the numerical findings of content analyses of the newspapers for which they work. In part, our small undertaking here is an attempt to begin to address this gap. What might some employees who worked at *The London Free Press* initially under the Blackburn family, then under Sun Media, and subsequently under Quebecor, have to contribute to this discussion? To us, their answers were surprising and complex; ultimately, this material raises as many questions as it answers.

### **Content Analysis Methodology and Findings**

For our initial content analysis, we chose to sample the year 1995, as representative of the *Free Press* under Blackburn control, and 2000 as representative of the paper under corporate ownership. Using random numbers, we generated ten issues from each day of the week for each year under consideration. In 2000, there was also a Sunday newspaper, and it, too, was measured and counted. Because of limited resources and time, we decided to measure only the sections of the newspaper containing local, national and international news of a general nature (no sports or business): in 1995, that was the front section (devoted to a mix of local, provincial, national and international news) and the second section (then entirely devoted to local coverage of London and its surrounding area); in 2000, there was only one section to consider because the front and the local section had been folded together to make stand-alone sports and business sections, a decision made under Sun ownership in 1998 (Paynter personal interview). Working from microfiche and using a standard ruler, we calculated total area of the news

hole: we measured the pertinent sections and coded relevant information, noting when stories were written by staff reporters and when wire copy appeared. Again, because of the limited nature of our exploratory study, we did not measure the Op/Ed pages. Because this was a straightforward counting exercise, we did not perform an intercoder reliability test; we did, however, work together initially in order that we could ensure consistency in measuring and typing of stories.

Our initial hypothesis that news coverage was lessening, based on our impressions of the difference in size of the newspaper from 1995 to 2000, proved to be correct; there is a statistically significant difference in the size of the news hole in the comparative papers: in 1995, the editorial space in the average paper constituted 1782.36 square inches; in 2000, the editorial space had shrunk to 1288.02 square inches. Similarly, our numbers show a statistically significant difference between the amount of coverage by local reporters in 1995 and that of 2000: the ratio of locally written stories to all other types of news coverage in 1995 is 391/732 or .53, while in 2000, the ratio is 174/431 or .40.

### **The Larger Discussion**

The numbers in our small case study seemed to support similar conclusions to those of Candussi and Winter, Hackett and Uzelman, and McKenzie (based on their quantitative findings): if we are to judge a newspaper either positively or negatively by the sheer volume of news coverage it generates and the number of staff bylines it includes, then *The London Free Press* appeared to be doing a worse job in 2000 under corporate ownership than it was under the Blackburn family. To us, it seemed that the

implication of our initial hypothesis was true: independent family-run papers offer more news and more local news to consumers; in this regard, they appear “superior” to chains.

But after interviewing four people—some of whom were managers or journalists at *The London Free Press* during the years under consideration, some of whom still are—we now contend that such a conclusion is too simplistic. Rob Paynter came to *The London Free Press* in 1997 as managing editor, then moved to editor-in-chief in 1998; his employment was terminated in 2001. Richard Hoffman began his career at the *Free Press* in 1989 as a copy editor. He quickly worked his way to reporter, then to assistant city editor and by 1995, to city editor, and on to managing editor. His employment was terminated in 2001. Joe Ruscitti began as a reporter working for the (now closed) Chatham bureau of the *Free Press* in 1989. In 1995, he was a reporter, but is now managing editor. Peter Geigen-Miller worked as a reporter at the *Free Press* for 26 years; he retired last year.

It is important to note that none of these people with whom we spoke thought that our numerical findings were wrong or even inaccurate: in fact, all agreed that the numbers concurred with their recollections of issues like newsroom staffing and the unspoken ownership agenda during those times. But for these journalists, editors and managers, the fact that the news hole under the Blackburn family was larger and there was more local coverage did not make the paper necessarily “good.” And similarly, our finding that the news hole under corporate ownership in 2000 was considerably smaller with less locally written coverage and more wire, did not mean that all chain owners were “bad.” The distinction is made in part because between the years we compared, 1995 and 2000, *The London Free Press* was purchased by a chain, Sun Media. This occurred in

1997. Then approximately 18 months later, well into 1999, Sun Media itself was purchased by another conglomerate, Quebecor Inc., under whose ownership the paper continues to publish to this day.

***What is a “successful” paper?***

None of our interview subjects dispute the finding that the news hole was larger and the locally written coverage more plentiful under the Blackburn family. Referring to his early years of employment when Walter Blackburn was still very much in charge, “That was a time remembered around here fondly,” says long time *Free Press* reporter Peter Geigen-Miller. “The Blackburn family was very much a part of this community and that was the expectation. The unspoken goal (of the paper) was community betterment in the broadest sense of that.”

But by 1995, when we looked at the paper in our content analysis, Walter Blackburn had died and so had his daughter, Martha, who had subsequently taken over. Now the paper was being run by a consortium called the Blackburn Group. While Richard Hoffman, then city editor, agrees that there was a lot of copy and a great deal of local coverage, he accounts for this by pointing out that the *Free Press* employed a great many people, more than 400 at the time. “No one ever got fired, not for any reason,” he says. This to him was not necessarily a positive state of affairs.

“It’s the quality vs. the quantity,” he continues. “You can say there were more stories, but were they good stories? Were they worthwhile stories? Were there better stories but fewer stories later?”

Hoffman arrived at the paper shortly after it had undergone a major redesign both in terms of the paper’s layout and its newsroom configurations. Under the editorship of

Phil McLeod, the reporters were now working in ‘clusters’ or ‘pods’—sort of news teams that, according to Joe Ruscitti (then a reporter heading a cluster, now the managing editor), were supposed to generate new story ideas and cover them in-depth. While Ruscitti says he admires McLeod’s courage for trying something different, the cluster system was, for a variety of reasons, never a success, and never liked by the reporters.

Hoffman argues that by 1995, *The London Free Press* was a difficult place to work because the cluster system was not functioning and newsroom morale was at an all-time low. “So by the time your first content analysis occurs (in 1995), people just didn’t give a shit. They didn’t care. They were just filling space.”

Geigen-Miller concurs with this. “It was a really unhappy place to work. There were some really bad managers...morale was a big sink hole too at that time.” In addition, Geigen-Miller expresses dissatisfaction with the style of journalism he and the other reporters were urged to practise at the time—a style that he believes arose from the redesign and the cluster or pod method of running the newsroom. He calls the approach “McNugget journalism” because it was superficial and plentiful. “If there was a plan for content, I wasn’t aware of it,” he says.

During the earlier years of the Blackburn ownership, the paper did appear to satisfy both its customers and its newsroom staff. It fostered community spirit, covered local stories in-depth, and its journalists were satisfied enough that they were not unionized. Success, during this now historic era, meant covering London and its surrounding community with interest and sensitivity, and treating employees in a paternal manner (Geigen-Miller, personal interview). But by 1995, the year we chose for our first measurement of editorial content, the situation had changed.

Hoffman explains, “The way the Blackburns were managing sounds like the good old days because no one would get fired no matter how incompetent you were, but carrying all that baggage meant that when you had to tighten down, no one could even go and cover some famous lawyer getting canned in Toronto. We couldn’t fund people to go to Toronto to cover some story. Morale was just in the toilet. And there was nothing as a manager, and by that time I was an assistant city editor, or city editor, and there was nothing you could do. There was no money and they weren’t going to give you any money. So at the end of the Blackburn dynasty, it was really sad and pathetic.”

From the perspective of the newsroom, this was not a successful paper at all. Hoffman, Geigen-Miller and Ruscitti all expressed frustration with a reporting system that was not functioning. They were not chasing daily news as they had been keen to do, and in the case of Ruscitti and Geigen-Miller as reporters, they lacked management and financial support to do investigative work. It appears that in 1995, everyone knew that the Blackburn family planned to sell their paper; it was simply a question of when and to whom.

### ***Can a chain really create “success”?***

In 1997, a year that falls between the two we selected for measurement, the Sun Media chain purchased *The London Free Press*. Rob Paynter, who was hired as managing editor, then moved on to editor-in-chief, is a self-described “Sun guy” from way back. He was brought to the paper in May of 1997 before the deal was finalized so he could get a look at the newspaper’s operation.

“It had declining circulation, it had declining revenues, it had a bureaucracy that

was totally ineffectual and extremely well-paid and we had to put the thing on a modern and more professional footing.”

Not surprisingly, the thought of the family-owned newspaper being purchased by a chain caused a great deal of anxiety in the newsroom. Like many, they were operating under the widespread assumption that independent papers are better than those owned by corporations. Paynter notes that there was a great deal of trepidation.

“The perception that the Sun had bought the thing and oh-my-god, what’s going to happen to Canada’s oldest independently owned newspaper? This storied newspaper that broke Grassy Narrows and got a shot of Margaret Trudeau at Club 54, and you’re these tabloid characters coming in, and what do you expect? That we’re going to ride through the newsroom bareback eating babies or something?”

Hoffman, Geigen-Miller and Ruscitti concur that there were concerns about being taken over and possibly even being turned into a tabloid. “We were fearful as hell,” says Hoffman.

In fact, what occurred when the sale of the paper to the Sun was complete appears remarkably positive. All four people speak of the Sun’s takeover in quite glowing terms. Hoffman describes the atmosphere at the time as being “like someone opened a window.” For Geigen-Miller, while he notes that the purchase was “regarded initially with some dread, it turned out it brought a lot of energy to the place; it was re-energized.”

Joe Ruscitti, an assistant city editor at the time (now managing editor), explains in part why the response of the journalists was so positive. “The place was re-energized from the newsroom perspective. The Sun showed up and it was clear to everyone that the cluster system was not doing what it was supposed to do—it was inhibiting our chasing

breaking news stories. With the Sun, they put a premium on breaking news—it's what the Sun does."

But more than that, Ruscitti, Hoffman and Paynter also note that the addition of a new publisher, John Paton, made an impact and assuaged a lot of the concern some may have felt. "John Paton was a smart guy," says Ruscitti. "He tried to make this a good hard newspaper, not a Sun paper. It became our job again (as reporters) to go out and get stories, good old newspaper boys and girls go out and get the stories—that's just not what was happening in the cluster system."

Under Sun ownership, one of the first changes that occurred was that the paper's new owners and their management team scrapped the pod or cluster system and went back to a more traditional style of newsroom with an editor-in-chief, a managing editor and a group of departments staffed by individual reporters. With a clearer organizational system in place, and a new publisher who obviously loved news and the city of London, the newsroom underwent a sea change.

***Can an individual personality make a difference for the better?***

Linda McQuaig writes, in *Shooting the Hippo: Death by Deficit and Other Canadian Myths*, that

all media are owned by rich, powerful members of the elite. To assume that this fact has no interference on the ideas they present would be equivalent to assuming that, should the entire media be owned by say, labour unions, or women's groups, or social workers, this would have no impact on editorial content. (12)

Clearly this perspective is shared by a number of respected media critics, like Hackett or Winter on the Canadian scene, Chomsky and Hermann to name but two on an

international plane. While we do not disagree that owners make clear their agenda to the publishers and managers that they hire, and that they do influence (to a greater or lesser extent, directly and indirectly) the content of their media holdings, the results of these interviews also tentatively suggest that individual personalities of those in positions of power—not necessarily owners themselves—can affect the tenor of a newsroom. John Paton, brought in as publisher by Sun Media in 1997 to make *The London Free Press* a success, may be one of those people.

Working from the grass roots up, Peter Geigen-Miller attributes the positive feeling in the newsroom in 1997 to Paton himself. “He really took an interest in the place and in the people—he knew everyone’s name—he was that kind of person. Suddenly the paper had focus again. It was an exciting time.”

When discussing success of a commercial venture, it is a general assumption that the word goes hand in hand with “financial.” But according to Hoffman, Paton saw success differently.

“With John, I think he wanted the *Free Press* to be a success intellectually as well. One thing I think was significant about John Paton was that he was a hometown boy—a Londoner. You know, the Blackburns had a sense of community, and that’s what John certainly had, and this was his hometown and he wasn’t going to let anyone screw up his reputation.”

Rob Paynter points out that Paton came from humble immigrant roots and grew up in a poor section of London. He says that Paton drove him in his Lexus to a run-down street where he once lived, and told him he was never going back there. “To me, that said

that this thing, this paper that the Sun had bought, totally unlike anything the Sun had ever owned, had to be a success.”

It is difficult to ascertain the effect that individual personalities can have on social situations, and it is beyond the scope of this small study to draw overly broad conclusions from this one instance, but it might be worthwhile to explore possible connections between, on the one hand, types of managers, personal upbringing and education, and attitudes in the newsroom and, on the other hand, journalistic morale and output. In our study, it is not possible to be certain because while it seems undisputed that John Paton was popular in the *Free Press* newsroom and in the city of London itself, he also had owners who allowed him to spend money and invest in their new venture. His tenure as publisher was followed by that of Lester Pyette, under the 1999 owners Quebecor Inc. As Joe Ruscitti rightly points out, no one could make enormous cuts to the newsroom budget, as Pyette did for Quebecor, and remain popular.

***But “better” means money too***

It must be said that in part, the reason that there was an upswing in the outlook of the newsroom in 1997 was that there was an influx of revenue, and that was partially brought about by making the workforce smaller. Hoffman and Paynter explain that there was a considerable cut in the numbers of employees at the *Free Press* both before the Sun took over, and after it became the official owner. Hoffman says that as part of the deal to make the sale to the Sun happen, the Blackburn Group had to lessen its workforce by about 120 people (Hoffman, personal interview). “They were Blackburn buyouts, not Sun buyouts,” he says. Then he continues, “But here’s the thing—all those people left, and in

the first year (1997), the profits and revenue went from about \$7 million to about \$11 million, from '97 to '98."

Paynter furthers the point. "That wasn't so much growing in advertising or single copy subscriptions, but the effects of the buyouts because they showed up on the bottom line. You know when you pay someone \$100,000 to go away, it doesn't show up on your sheet, it shows up as a separate item, so the profits looked better than they actually were because the profits went up almost immediately."

While Hoffman and Paynter say that in their opinion, the most profitable paper in the Sun chain at the time would have been the *Toronto Sun*, they say that the profit margins at *The London Free Press* were extremely high. "Most papers operate on about a 20 per cent profit margin, and the *Free Press*, in the last year we were there (2001), was at about 38 or 39 per cent ... It was the highest in the country," says Paynter.

"And this sounds pretty good from a publisher's perspective," Hoffman continues, picking up from Paynter's point. "You know, revenue, revenue, revenue. But from a journalist's perspective, it was like, 'Hey, we can do all this stuff.' And that's the way we thought. If they made money, great, because it will fund the thing for us."

It does appear that the Sun was prepared to invest in its newest paper. While Ruscitti notes that they made some unpopular decisions to cut costs, like closing bureaus in Woodstock, Sarnia, Chatham, Ottawa and Toronto, and folding the two front sections into one to help fund an expensive stand-alone business and sports section, in general, all four people interviewed agree that the year and a half under Sun ownership was a golden time. In part, for Paynter, this was because he had a great deal of control over how his budget was spent. He says that his budget was about \$7 million in 1997 and 1998, and

while it mostly comprised staff wages, he would always tuck away some of that money for a discretionary “special projects” fund. It was, he and Hoffman suggest, because of that kind of investment that the paper was not only nominated for a couple of national newspaper awards, but also actually won one.

So while success can be financial, or social, or based on an ephemeral connection to the community a paper serves, by and large the journalists with whom we spoke measured success by the extent to which they could do what they perceived their jobs to be: as Ruscitti puts it, “chasing stories.”

It is unclear whether or not the optimistic outlook brought about by a number of factors under Sun ownership would have continued. The fact is, the company was purchased by Quebecor Inc. in 1999, and this company appeared to want an even greater profit margin from the London newspaper. While for the most part, the journalists and managers with whom we spoke saw the Sun as a welcome change from a dying family-run business, and perhaps even as a benevolent chain owner, Quebecor does not engender a similar response.

***What's better for Quebecor isn't good at all from the newsroom perspective***

As discussed in our findings section of this paper, we did measure the news hole in 2000 and found that it had shrunk. In addition, there was a statistically significant drop in the amount of local bylines and a rise in the amount of wire copy the paper offered. To us, this was not an improvement or success in any sense of those words. To those we interviewed, the numbers were no surprise. While none of them said that had we measured the paper during the years it belonged to the Sun chain, we would have necessarily found more news and at least as much locally written copy, what they did

stress during those years and point to as successful was the optimistic outlook of the reporters, and the good, hard journalism that resulted in some award recognition. As Joe Ruscitti put it, “We were doin’ news.”

While under the Sun’s ownership and the direction of John Paton as publisher, it was apparent that Rob Paynter as editor-in-chief had a great deal of freedom. Richard Hoffman, by then managing editor, says that it was not unusual to want to “bump” the size of the paper to accommodate more news. Under the Sun, this had never been a problem, he says. But when Quebecor took over, and installed a new publisher, Lester Pyette, that ceased to be the case and control shifted from these two men to Pyette himself.

“I’ll never forget,” says Hoffman to Paynter. “You and I were in his office...and now normally, when advertising tells the back shop how many ads they have, there’s this old guy—or at least at the *Freeps*—who could calculate ‘ok, how many ads? Here’s how much editorial.’ And he’d give you the page configurations. And generally it was our purview to say, ‘Ok, take it up a couple of pages.’ And I remember we had done something like that, and we were both called down to Lester’s office, and I remember sitting there and him saying something (Hoffman makes pulling and snipping motion). He was just yanking pages out like they were dandelions. I was shocked.”

It seems clear from a business perspective that if revenue cannot be raised, cutting costs is essential. A quick way to bring this about, according to Hoffman and Paynter, was to cut editorial pages. In addition, if people left on maternity leave, retired, were fired or bought out, they were not replaced. These factors seem to account for our finding

of smaller news hole and significantly less locally generated copy. “There were fewer and fewer people, but fewer pages to do it in anyway,” says Hoffman.

The two individuals who still work for *The London Free Press* under Quebecor ownership do not disagree. “Pyette had a budget to make, no doubt. Early in Quebecor’s ownership, it was clear they’re about making the budget and I have no doubt there would be more pressure on a publisher under Quebecor than under the Sun,” says Ruscitti. “You make the budget in Quebecor. That’s the story.”

Peter Geigen-Miller shakes his head and speaks slowly. “I’ve always been pleased that during my career, I’ve not had to work for the Thomson chain. They were a notoriously cheap news organization, but I do believe that these guys at Quebecor outdo them. It’s a much smaller paper now. I don’t know what the quality is like, but our ability to do the job has suffered. We can’t cover the community. We hit the highlights and that’s all we can do.”

As he has been setting up his plans to retire from the *Free Press*, Geigen-Miller says he misses being able to deal with administration people who live in the same city and understand his concerns, perhaps even know him personally as was the case when he began at the paper 26 years ago. “Quebecor is about the bottom line. I don’t think they have any understanding of the community that they serve and no consideration for the people that they employ.”

Speaking anecdotally, both he and Ruscitti believe that the size of the news hole, were we to measure it today in 2006, would be even smaller than it was in 2000. There simply aren’t enough people to cover the assignments and there is no money to hire more.

“What I’ve learned post-Sun and into Quebecor is that there is a ‘right’ number (of reporters), a number that everyone feels works,” says Ruscitti. “So just as I feel that now we’re understaffed and looking back now, though I wouldn’t have said it at the time, during the Sun Media days, those numbers were just about right. We were big enough to do what we wanted, with enough people to get the job done, but also small enough to choose not to be unproductive and feel like one of your colleagues would have to carry that.”

### ***Conclusion***

The results of our small exploratory study of *The London Free Press* are better suited to raising more questions than to offering pat conclusions. While our initial hypothesis, that the paper’s news hole was shrinking and that locally written coverage was in decline since it moved from family to corporate ownership, does appear to be supported by our statistics, the tangential hypothesis that therefore independent family-owned newspapers are good and chains are bad appears not necessarily to be the case. While the numbers are accurate and the news people we interviewed do not dispute the findings, they do augment and refocus our conclusions. The information they offer seems to suggest that there might be such a thing as a benevolent chain, and that some chain owners are definitely better than others. In the case of *The London Free Press* under Sun ownership, it is impossible to know whether or not the paper would have continued to produce award-winning copy and the reporters and their editors would have continued to feel largely satisfied with the work they produced, because the ownership situation changed. It is possible that the Sun group, after a few years of investing human and financial resources into the paper, might have chosen to stop doing so; it may have made

the same unpopular cost-cutting decisions that Quebecor has instituted. What is clear is that at present, newsroom morale is again very low and the paper is operating on a skeleton staff with about 22 people to run its city section (Ruscitti, personal interview). Further content analysis would enable us to learn whether Ruscitti and Geigen-Miller's anecdotal impressions are correct: that the paper's news hole is continuing to shrink and that local coverage has suffered even more. To make the findings more significant, it would be useful to compare the situation in London to other Canadian newspapers and to continue to augment the numbers and measuring with interviews from those intimately involved in the daily production of the paper.

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