

**Convergence and the “Black News Hole”:
Canadian Newspaper Coverage of the 2003 Lincoln Report**

Marc Edge

Thompson Rivers University

Abstract

Canada has historically had highly-concentrated press ownership, but in 2000 cross-media convergence also became a factor, as the two largest privately-owned television networks made major newspaper acquisitions. This paper examines daily newspaper coverage of a 2003 report on broadcasting that included a call for a moratorium on new licences for broadcasters that also own newspapers. Anecdotal observations of press critics that newspaper coverage of the report fell into a “Black News Hole” are confirmed.

Introduction

In mid-2003, after two years of study and public hearings across Canada, the standing Heritage Committee of the House of Commons issued an 872-page report described by one communication scholar as “the most comprehensive review of Canadian broadcasting in 20 years.”¹ Titled *Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century Of Canadian Broadcasting*, the report made 97 recommendations for addressing concerns that had been widely expressed in Canada since a series of media mergers in 2000 saw the two largest privately-owned television networks partner with some of the country’s largest daily newspapers. Specifically, the committee chaired by Member of Parliament Clifford Lincoln called for an immediate moratorium on new broadcast licenses for companies that also own newspapers pending a government review of the issue, saying “the danger is that too much power can fall into too few hands and it is power without accountability.”² A firm government policy on the issue of media cross-ownership was

badly needed and should be in place by June 2004, the report recommended. “The potential problems with cross-media ownership are sufficiently severe that the time has come for the federal government to issue a clear and unequivocal policy on this matter.”³ Restrictions on foreign ownership, which some industry advocates had argued should be lifted, were instead recommended to be maintained in order to better preserve Canada’s cultural sovereignty. The report also urged increased funding for the publicly-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, for the same reason.

But despite the obvious amount of government resources that went into producing the report, if not the importance of the issues it addressed, media coverage of the Lincoln Report and its recommendations was “sparse,” according to media critics. *Toronto Star* columnist Antonia Zerbisias concluded from the paucity of press coverage that it “virtually fell into a black news hole.”

You’d think that, when five pounds of government reportage about broadcasting in this corporately merged and converged Canada hit all the desks in Media Land, the thud would be deafening. Instead, the mediaocracy has been strangely silent. Or, maybe not so strangely. . . . These are not proposals that some media barons wanted to see. To them the CBC is competition, unfairly aided and abetted by a billion bucks or so of government funding every year. Some media chiefs would like to sell out to foreigners in order to boost their stock value. And none wants to see limits placed on their growth, even if that growth is against the public interest in a democracy that depends on a diverse marketplace of ideas.⁴

The federal government’s response to the report, which was mandated by law to be delivered within six months, elicited little more press coverage when it came in November. The first paragraphs of the eleven-page response cautioned the industry not to expect much action, and in the absence of hard news to report, press reports were similarly muted. “Many of the issues addressed by the Standing Committee are complex and interrelated,” stated the government’s response. “Accordingly, many of its 97

recommendations call for further analysis, examination and policy development before any decisions are taken.”⁵ The lack of government support for the Lincoln committee’s recommendations was described as “appalling” by a spokesman for the advocacy group Our Public Airwaves. “They’re not prepared to commit even in principle,” complained executive director Arthur Lewis.⁶

As a result of the scarcity of publicity attracted by the Lincoln Report, the industry journal *Playback* in early 2004 labeled it the “under-reported” report. “Sank like a cinder block. Gone the way of the dodo. Fell off the radar. These are the phrases that spring to mind when one thinks of the Lincoln report.”⁷ Public broadcasting advocates complained that the seven months since its release had seen the report “unfairly buried” and “shouted down by big media,” according to *Playback*.

The report made no splash, eliciting only a lukewarm formal response from Ottawa and little mainstream media attention, leading some to suggest that maybe – just maybe – the whole thing had been willfully ignored by this country’s biggest congloms, CanWest Global and BCE, which would prefer to see ownership laws relaxed and the CBC cut down.⁸

The scant press coverage the Lincoln report received was evidence to some Canadians of a conspiracy of silence in their highly-concentrated and now converged media. Others pointed to alternative, less Machiavellian explanations. This article examines coverage of the Lincoln report in major Canadian daily newspapers, compares the situation surrounding it with an analogous scenario playing itself out in the U.S., and analyses media conspiracy theories and alternative explanations for plausibility.

Background

Canada saw a series of corporate mergers in 2000 that changed the media landscape as firms sought to catch the wave of cross-media “convergence” that began building with the marriage early that year in the U.S. between AOL and Time Warner. “Cross-ownership” of outlets in different media by the same company, as convergence was called then, had been banned in Canada by Order in Council following the 1981 report of the Royal Commission on Newspapers, but the prohibition had been allowed to lapse in 1985 after control of the federal government passed from the Liberal Party to the Conservatives.⁹ A proposed Canada Newspaper Act that would have limited the size of newspaper chains and addressed the cross-ownership issue similarly died on the order paper with the change of government.

The first move toward a major media acquisition in Canada came in February 2000 when telecom giant Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE) made a \$2.3-billion takeover bid for CTV, one of the country’s two major privately-owned broadcast television networks. The bid was accepted by CTV shareholders the following month after BCE sweetened its offer slightly, and the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) approved the creation of a trust to hold the shares until the federal regulator approved the deal.¹⁰ In July, Canada’s other major private television network, CanWest Global Communications, which also owned television networks in Ireland, New Zealand, and Australia, trumped BCE’s purchase of CTV with a \$3.5-billion deal to buy the Southam newspaper chain of 13 metropolitan dailies and 130 smaller titles from Conrad Black’s Hollinger Inc. The oldest chain of dailies across Canada had been founded in the 19th Century by printer William Southam, but family control of the

newspapers had declined since the early 1980s until it was gradually taken over by Hollinger in the mid-1990s.¹¹ The purchase by CanWest also included the *National Post* that Black had founded in 1998 as a daily distributed across Canada on the strength of Southam's nationwide resources. Acquisition of major dailies in many of the same cities where CanWest already owned television stations gave it considerable multimedia leverage, which it declared its intention to exploit by combining newsgathering resources across media. In Vancouver on Canada's west coast, for example, it suddenly owned both daily newspapers, most of the community press, and the two largest private television stations with its acquisition earlier that year of market-leading BCTV.¹² By combining newsgathering operations between its television outlets and the Southam newspapers across the country, CanWest estimated it could save \$100 million in costs annually.¹³

In September, BCE went CanWest one better by partnering with Thomson's *Globe and Mail* newspaper to create a new a \$4-billion entity called Bell Globemedia. This created a multimedia partnership between BCE, the CTV network and the 156-year-old *Globe and Mail*, which had expanded in the early 1980s from its base as a Toronto daily through satellite distribution into the country's first nationally-distributed daily. The partnership was announced shortly before the CRTC was to hold hearings into the previously-announced takeover of CTV by BCE, thus convergence became an even hotter topic of discussion at the hearings. But Ken Thomson, the second hereditary Lord Thomson of Fleet and Canada's richest man, had taken only a minority position in the new Bell Globemedia, holding just 29.9 percent ownership. This prevented direct CRTC scrutiny of his involvement in the new enterprise for the moment, as only transactions

exceeding 30 percent ownership of broadcasting companies required prior CRTC approval.¹⁴

The prize for the largest Canadian media transaction in 2000, however, went not to BCE or CanWest Global but instead to Quebecor, which controlled almost half the daily newspaper circulation in the province of Quebec and had recently expanded nationwide by taking over the Toronto Sun chain of 15 English-language dailies and more than 100 community newspapers across Canada. In a seven-month takeover battle, Quebecor outbid Rogers Communications, which until 2000 was the country's largest media company with interests in cable television and magazine publishing, for Quebec cable giant Groupe Videotron.¹⁵ The \$5.4-billion takeover included the province's largest television network, TVA, which put Quebecor in the convergence game as a major player hot on the heels of CanWest and BCE.

The tectonic shifts in the Canadian media landscape seen in 2000 left Bell Globemedia as by far the largest media firm in the country, pending regulatory approval. CanWest Global ranked a solid second with its acquisition of the Southam newspaper chain, followed by Quebecor. (See Table 1)

Table 1 – Largest media firms in Canada¹⁶

	Revenue (millions)		Operations
	2003	2002	
Bell Globemedia	2,734	2,176	Telecoms, CTV network, <i>Globe and Mail</i>
CanWest Global	1,897	1,821	Global TV network, Southam newspapers
Quebecor	1,217	1,173	TVA television, Sun newspaper chain
Torstar	894	832	<i>Toronto Star</i> , CityMedia newspaper chain
Rogers	845	785	Cable TV, radio, magazines

Regulatory approval

Approval by the CRTC of BCE's takeover of CTV was smoothed by a \$230-million "Public Benefits" package, as required by the federal regulator since the late 1980s. To ensure that a portion of the proceeds from corporate takeovers of media companies goes toward worthwhile media projects, the CRTC required acquiring companies to devote 10 percent of the purchase price to Public Benefits, which usually take the form of direct programming initiatives. Public Benefits money from media takeovers has also been increasingly finding its way into the halls of academia, however, in what some scholars have described as "greenmail" endowments.¹⁷ As part of the mammoth BCE deal, a number of scholarly benefits were disbursed, including \$2.5 million for an endowed chair in media convergence at Ryerson University in Toronto.¹⁸ BCE also provided another \$3.5 million to fund a Canadian Media Research Consortium set up between several universities, including Ryerson, York, and the University of British Columbia, with a mandate to "focus on the development of Canadian data for use in media planning."¹⁹ Revelations in the press about a letter-writing campaign to the CRTC by faculty members from these institutions in support of BCE's takeover of CTV led the advocacy group Canadian Journalism Foundation to sever its association with the CMRC in 2001.²⁰

In issuing its approval of the CTV takeover in December 2000, the CRTC required BCE to publish a "code of conduct" aimed at protecting consumers by prohibiting "anti-competitive behavior."²¹ The issue of convergence between television and newspaper newsgathering operations would be decided at hearings the following spring, when the broadcasting licences of both CTV and CanWest Global were up for

renewal. In March, however, Quebecor volunteered just such a code of conduct in applying for CRTC approval to take over TVA.²² The six-page code, which could only be changed with CRTC approval, not only promised that Quebecor's print and broadcast journalists would not work together, but that they "shall at no time transmit, receive, exchange or discuss information by phone, fax, Internet or other technology."²³ The code was similar to that instituted in 1997 when Quebecor took over the smaller Quebec television network TQS, which it was required to divest upon acquiring TVA. The CRTC in July made adherence to the code of conduct a condition of approving the takeover of TVA by Quebecor, while also requiring a Public Benefits package of \$48.9 million.²⁴ The figure reflected 10 percent of the valuation the CRTC put on the TVA portion of Quebecor's purchase, and was considerably higher than the \$35 million Quebecor had been offering.

When the CRTC convened hearings in April into the licence renewal applications for 31 CTV and 19 CanWest television stations, both networks balked at keeping their print and broadcast news operations completely separate, as Quebecor had pledged to do. They agreed to maintain separate management structures for print and broadcast, but stopped short of accepting a binding "code" of separation as a condition of licence renewal. They pledged only to append a one-page "Statement of Principles and Practices" to their renewed broadcasting licence as a voluntary "commitment" and insisted that they should "self-police" their own operations, which would not be subject to CRTC scrutiny. Yet in presenting a united front to the CRTC, as the *Toronto Star* pointed out, "both drafted their own codes for maintaining separate 'news management structures,' although they did that drafting in concert with one another."²⁵

The networks were supported by several academics in their refusal to enact a code of conduct ensuring a “firewall” between their print and broadcast news operations. Before the licence renewal hearings began, Donna Logan, director of the Graduate School of Journalism at UBC in Vancouver, called a required code of conduct “draconian and excessive.”²⁶ In testimony at the hearings, Fred Fletcher, chair of Communication and Culture program at York University in Toronto, testified that convergence between print and broadcast outlets would provide the “potential for greater journalistic competition.”²⁷ Logan told the CRTC that cross-ownership would mean that more resources could be pumped into investigative journalism by multimedia owners.

One of the things that has always disturbed me about journalism in Canada is that there were too many reporters chasing so few stories. . . . Converged journalism offers an opportunity to break out of that mould by freeing up reporters to do stories that are not being done and are vital to democratic discourse.²⁸

CanWest Global executives also threatened during the licence renewal hearings to launch a constitutional legal challenge if the CRTC imposed a binding code of conduct on its print and broadcast news operations. In August, the broadcasting licences of the networks were renewed for the regular seven-year term by the CRTC without the imposition of restrictions beyond what had been volunteered by CanWest and CTV.²⁹ The decision was criticized by the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists, which stated it was “very, very worried” that the moves toward convergence of media would lead to a lowered quality of news.³⁰ But CTV president Trina McQueen called the CRTC’s ruling “one of the best things that has ever happened to Canadian journalism.”³¹ Due to the combined newsgathering resources of her television network and the *Globe*

and *Mail*, McQueen added that international reporting and investigative journalism would be strengthened and thus there would soon be a “bigger pot of information.”³²

Subsequent events

In December 2001, CanWest announced that thrice-weekly editorials for all its newspapers would be written at head office in Winnipeg, contrary to the long-standing Southam policy of allowing local editorial independence. This prompted reporters at its *Montreal Gazette* to withdraw their bylines in protest.³³ The following week, 70 *Gazette* journalists signed a petition against what they called “an attempt to centralize opinion to serve the corporate interests of CanWest.” They also created a website to publicize what they claimed was interference in the newspaper’s content from members of the Asper family that owned CanWest Global. Asper influence, they claimed, had resulted in coverage more favorable to the federal Liberal party and the state of Israel, both of which the family strongly supported. But the protest died down after CanWest reportedly threatened journalists in an internal memo with “sanctions, including suspension or termination” if they persisted.³⁴ “The slightest misstep, the memo warned – even ‘gossiping’ – could lead to dismissal,” reported the *Toronto Star*.³⁵ Company executive David Asper addressed what he called “the bleeding hearts of the journalist community” in a speech that was reprinted in CanWest newspapers. “It’s the end of the world as they know it,” he said, paraphrasing a song by the rock band R.E.M., “and I feel fine.”³⁶

The controversy grew in 2002 after long-time Halifax *Daily News* columnist Stephen Kimber in Atlantic Canada quit in January because he said his columns had been changed “to match the owner’s point of view.” The newspaper’s editor then resigned

after admitting interference from CanWest headquarters in Winnipeg in *Daily News* content.³⁷ The *Columbia Journalism Review* reported that in addition to imposing national editorials, one such CanWest column – arguing that Canada should back Israel no matter how it responds to Palestinian suicide bombings, “without the usual handwringing criticism about ‘excessive force’” – even came with a no-rebuttal order. “Papers in the Southam chain were told to carry neither columns nor letters to the editor taking issue with that editorial, according to journalists at two Southam papers, who said the order came via a conference call.”³⁸

In February, CanWest chairman and patriarch Israel “Izzy” Asper wrote a column criticizing the CBC as “an anachronism and a waste of public funds,” as well as a “huge bureaucracy” of “overpaid, underworked CBC head office executives who are living well off the taxpayers of Canada.”³⁹ While Asper had long opposed the very concept of a public broadcaster, which provided much of CanWest’s competition for television viewers, observers noted that his campaign had been stepped up a notch since his acquisition of the Southam dailies.⁴⁰ Criticism of the CBC became a regular feature in CanWest’s newly-acquired newspapers, including charges of pro-Palestinian bias in news coverage.⁴¹ Soon the Aspers began demanding that the CBC drop revenue-generating programming such as sports and local news that could just as well be covered by private broadcasters and focus instead on money-losing culture and drama productions.⁴²

In March, reporters at the Regina *Leader-Post* also went on byline strike after they claimed a story quoting a speech at the local journalism school about CanWest’s national editorial policy was re-written to remove a reference to censorship.⁴³ In June, 40 former Southam executives took out a full-page advertisement in newspapers not owned

by CanWest (the ads were refused by the former Southam dailies), criticizing the company's national editorial policy and calling on the federal government to enact measures to ensure local editorial independence if it was not restored.⁴⁴ Then the simmering controversy ignited into a firestorm later that month when Russell Mills, the long-time publisher of the *Ottawa Citizen* in the nation's capital, was fired by CanWest Global after the *Citizen* called for the resignation of Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien as a result of a growing patronage scandal. After opposition politicians renewed calls for an inquiry into the press in Canada, the Vienna-based International Press Institute called the Mills firing "an attack on press freedom by an unholy coalition between politics and big business."⁴⁵ Televised debates in Parliament were dominated for days by accusations that Chretien had ordered the firing personally.⁴⁶

In September, CanWest quietly abandoned its policy of imposing national editorials on its newspapers, to the skepticism of some who warned that Asper family bias would remain in place.⁴⁷ In January 2003, the *Globe and Mail* reported what it described as "this country's most aggressive attempt to centralize editorial operations across a newspaper chain" when it revealed an internal CanWest memo setting out plans for a centralized news desk at company headquarters in Winnipeg to co-ordinate news coverage of the former Southam dailies across Canada.⁴⁸ The following month, Senator Joan Fraser, who had been editor of the *Montreal Gazette* when Conrad Black took over Southam almost a decade earlier, announced that the Committee on Transport and Communications she chaired would hold public hearings on media ownership starting in the spring.⁴⁹

The Lincoln Committee

On the parliamentary side of the Canadian government, Heritage Minister Sheila Copps had asked Lincoln, in his capacity as chairman of the House of Commons heritage committee, to investigate concentration of press ownership as early as 1999, after Hollinger threatened to pull its newly-acquired Southam newspapers out of the nationwide news co-operative, The Canadian Press, threatening its survival.⁵⁰ She also bruited the idea of an inquiry into media ownership amidst the multimedia deals of 2000, but a heritage committee investigation did not start to take shape until the end of February 2001. Under Lincoln's direction, it was incarnated to hold hearings into the future of the broadcasting system in Canada and issue a report by the end of 2001.⁵¹ But the following month, Asper family influence over the political coverage of Southam newspapers became apparent to the point that opposition MPs began demanding an inquiry into press ownership as well. In advance of the CRTC hearings into CanWest's convergence with the Southam newspaper chain, David Asper wrote a column carried chain-wide that described as "remarkably unfair" press coverage of the patronage scandal surrounding the prime minister. According to Asper, media reporting of the so-called Shawinigate affair had "crossed a line that delineates solid investigative reporting from adjective-driven innuendo."⁵²

All three federal opposition parties combined to demand an inquiry into concentration of media ownership in Canada, suggesting that the Aspers, who were long-time Liberal supporters, were trying to curry favor with the government because Global's television licences were up for renewal.⁵³ Copps responded by first promising a "blue-ribbon" panel of experts to study the impact of increased media ownership concentration

in Canada.⁵⁴ But within days she reversed herself and announced that media ownership would instead also be studied by the Lincoln Committee, along with broadcasting policy, with a report to issue in 2002.⁵⁵ “Ours is not a race against convergence,” Lincoln said the following week in unveiling the expanded terms of reference of his non-binding review. “We’re going to lose that race. . . . We’ve got to find out what the impact is.”⁵⁶ Televised hearings were held across Canada in the spring of 2002, with a report promised by mid-December. Meanwhile, the planned Senate hearings into media ownership, chaired by Senator Joan Fraser, were adjourned to avoid “complete confusion,” according to Lincoln.⁵⁷

The Lincoln Committee did not issue its report until mid-June 2003, more than two years after its inception. Rumours began to leak out earlier that spring of a split between committee members from the left-wing New Democratic Party, the right-wing Canadian Alliance, and even government MPs. The *National Post* reported on June 6 that the committee had “been unable to achieve consensus, with even the Liberal vice-chairman of the committee saying yesterday he will provide his own recommendations separately from the report.”⁵⁸ The *Post* also scooped the report’s conclusions by reporting on the eve of its release not only the recommendations it would make, but also that Alliance party members of the committee would issue their own dissenting report calling for “greater openness to foreign ownership and less stringent Canadian content regulations.”⁵⁹ The neo-conservative national daily enjoyed two days of leaked coverage of the recommendations and the heritage committee’s internal rift before the report’s official release on June 11.

The Canadian Alliance, Bloc Quebecois and even the Liberal vice-chairman of the committee are filing separate opinions disagreeing with or

amplifying parts of the report, which includes in its title the words “Cultural Sovereignty.” The fact that Wendy Lill, the nationalist NDP member of the committee, is not filing a dissent is as telling about the report’s philosophical direction as the title.⁶⁰

Coverage of the report’s official release, its conclusions and recommendations, as well as the subsequent reaction to it, must be considered in light of the circumstances surrounding it, from its halting inception to its leaked release.

Newspaper Coverage

Press critics were correct in pointing to the paucity of daily newspaper coverage the Lincoln Report attracted. In some dailies, coverage of the report and its recommendations was comprehensive. In others, however, it was virtually non-existent. In at least one major daily, it was literally non-existent. In dailies on opposite ends of the political spectrum, significant qualitative differences in framing of the recommendations of the Lincoln Report were also detected, which may help to explain the report’s lack of press coverage. Database searches of Canadian newspaper coverage of the report’s June 11, 2003 release were conducted for this study. By combining use of the databases Factiva and Canadian Newsstand, the coverage of most of the largest-circulation daily newspapers in Canada was examined. Following is a listing of the English-language daily newspapers with a Friday circulation of greater than 50,000. (The Lincoln Report was released on a Thursday.) However, no stories appeared in the archived editions of either the *Edmonton Journal* or the *Montreal Gazette*. On querying or examining those dailies directly, however, it was discovered that the *Edmonton Journal* did indeed carry a news

item, but on recourse to the Canadian Newsstand database, that page was found not to have been captured.

Table 2 – Canadian English-Language Daily Newspapers

Title	Region	Owner	Circulation
<i>Toronto Star</i>	Ontario	Torstar	440,654
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	National	Bell Globemedia	314,178
<i>National Post</i>	National	CanWest Global	246,504
<i>Vancouver Sun</i>	British Columbia	CanWest Global	212,724
<i>Toronto Sun*</i>	Ontario	Quebecor	208,429
<i>Vancouver Province*</i>	British Columbia	CanWest Global	159,963
<i>Edmonton Journal</i>	Alberta	CanWest Global	151,718
<i>Montreal Gazette</i>	Quebec	CanWest Global	143,595
<i>Calgary Herald</i>	Alberta	CanWest Global	143,210
<i>Ottawa Citizen</i>	Ontario	CanWest Global	137,474
<i>Winnipeg Free Press</i>	Manitoba	Canadian Newsp.	119,117
<i>Hamilton Spectator</i>	Ontario	Torstar	105,765
<i>Halifax Chronicle-Herald</i>	Nova Scotia	Independent	93,015
<i>London Free Press</i>	Ontario	Quebecor	92,213
<i>Victoria Times Colonist</i>	British Columbia	CanWest Global	78,110
<i>Windsor Star</i>	Ontario	CanWest Global	74,686
<i>Edmonton Sun*</i>	Alberta	Quebecor	70,984
<i>Calgary Sun*</i>	Alberta	Quebecor	65,988
<i>Kitchener-Waterloo Record</i>	Ontario	Torstar	65,879

Saskatoon <i>StarPhoenix</i>	Saskatchewan	CanWest Global	62,915
Regina <i>Leader-Post</i>	Saskatchewan	CanWest Global	57,578
<i>Ottawa Sun</i> *	Ontario	Quebecor	50,883
* tabloid			

Source: Canadian Newspaper Association <http://www.cna-acj.ca/>

Newspapers of the Quebecor chain are not archived electronically in any of the databases searched by the author, nor are those of the independent Halifax *Chronicle-Herald*. As a result, coverage of the Lincoln Report's release could only be obtained for fifteen of the 22 dailies listed. However, these fifteen did include eleven of the twelve largest newspapers, as measured by circulation. Results of the database searches follow, listed in order of newspaper size by circulation, including the number of words devoted to the story, its page placement, headline, and source.

Table 3 – Newspaper Coverage of the Lincoln Report

Rank	Newspaper	Words	Page	Headline	Source
1	<i>Toronto Star</i>	966	A4	Cross-ownership under attack	Staff
2	<i>Globe and Mail</i>	630	A4	Broadcast review proposes overhaul	Staff
3	<i>National Post</i>	629	FP1	Freeze new cross-media licences, report says	CanWest
4	<i>Vancouver Sun</i>	71	D8	More cash for CBC recommended	none
6	<i>Vancouver Province</i>	263	A37	Keep lid on foreign ownership of our media, says report	CP

7	<i>Edmonton Journal</i>	318	A9	Report attacks media convergence	CanWest
8	<i>Montreal Gazette</i>	0			
9	<i>Calgary Herald</i>	413	A12	Moratorium urged to control cross-media ownership	CanWest
10	<i>Ottawa Citizen</i>	543	D1	Cross media ownership slammed	CanWest
11	<i>Winnipeg Free Press</i>	552	A9	Broadcast blueprint urges more for CBC	CP
12	<i>Hamilton Spectator</i>	834	E1	Increase CBC funding: study	CP
15	<i>Victoria Times-Colonist</i>	882	C1	Ottawa outlines media rules	CP
16	<i>Windsor Star</i>	312	A13	Freeze cross-media ownership: Report	CanWest
19	<i>Kitchener-Waterloo Record</i>	587	D9	Limit foreign ownership, media convergence: report	CP
20	<i>Saskatoon Star-Phoenix</i>	156	C4	Put media convergence on hold, report suggests	CP
21	<i>Regina Leader-Post</i>	572	D12	Committee concerned about media ownership	CanWest

Discussion

The most striking feature of the data, besides the total lack of coverage in the *Montreal Gazette*, is that news of the Lincoln Report was “buried” in another leading CanWest newspaper, the *Vancouver Sun*. The reduction by the *Sun* of the news of such a

voluminous government report on the media to a mere 71-word “business brief” can perhaps be explained in part by the headline atop the story: “More cash for CBC recommended.” Rather than focus on the issues of cross-ownership or foreign ownership, which would admittedly be difficult to accomplish in 71 words, the thrust of the story was made the increased funding urged for public broadcasting. Given the antipathy exhibited toward the CBC by the Asper family, however, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the influence of ownership on the *Vancouver Sun*’s coverage of this story was considerable, directly or indirectly.

However, alternative explanations have been advanced for the paucity of press coverage the Lincoln Report received upon its release. As *Toronto Star* media critic Antonia Zerbisias noted, the report’s length and complexity had even public broadcasting advocates digesting its recommendations for weeks after it was released.

Was it just too big? Too complex? Too ambitious? Should it have been pre-masticated into corporate PR-style, bite-sized bits for overworked journalists with other stories and other deadlines? . . . Perhaps it’s simply bad timing; the report came just as Parliament was heading for the cottage hills, while journalists had Olympic bids and other matters on the news schedule.⁶¹

Timing of the report’s release also come within weeks of several other, albeit less weighty, reports on the broadcasting industry, including one prepared for the CRTC on television drama by former CTV president Trina McQueen, one written for the Heritage committee on Canadian content by former National Film Board chairman Francois Macerola, and one on Canadian drama by the Coalition of Canadian Audio-Visual Unions.⁶² One Alliance party member of the Lincoln committee even predicted three weeks before its report was released that it would “likely be ignored because it’s too long and will be released during the Liberal leadership campaign.”⁶³

One possible journalistic explanation for the paucity of press coverage is the leaked coverage of the report's contents in the *National Post* for two days prior to its release. As most of the report's major recommendations were thus already "old news" by the time it was officially released, news editors might have considered that the news value of timeliness was somewhat reduced as a result. Whether this would explain why the story got the treatment it received on the pages of the *Vancouver Sun* is questionable, however. There, the peculiar relationship the *National Post* has with the monopoly dailies must also be taken into consideration. In an attempt to sell more copies of the *National Post* in Vancouver, the national daily regularly appropriated *Sun* and *Province* stories, which the local dailies were reportedly prohibited by corporate fiat from carrying. This has reportedly led journalists at the Vancouver dailies to consider themselves playing "second fiddle" to the *National Post*.⁶⁴ Also of some explanatory value might be the qualitative nature of the headlines the leaked news of the report's contents garnered earlier in the *National Post*, which were framed with such headlines as "TV protectionists score win" and "Give Canadian TV more cash" might well have been taken by *Sun* editors, not to mention those at other CanWest-owned dailies across the country, as a signal from ownership about how they should treat the story.

The American Parallel

Just as the Lincoln Report was being released in Canada, public awareness of almost identical issues in the U.S. was beginning to crest in grassroots outrage despite similarly sparse news media coverage. While Canadian news media theory is relatively under-developed, much research has been done on news content influences by American

scholars, and the similarity between the scenarios on opposite sides of the border may provide some clues to help explain the highly-analogous situation. The U.S. Federal Communications Commission began hearings in late 2002 into proposed rule changes on media ownership, including lifting a 1975 prohibition on cross-media ownership in local markets. By the height of the debate in February 2003, however, the *American Journalism Review* reported that a survey by the Pew Research Center found 72 percent of Americans had heard “nothing at all” about the proposed relaxation of media ownership rules.

As the FCC moved toward moved toward final action on a plan that would greatly benefit a handful of large companies, most newspapers and broadcast outlets owned by those companies barely mentioned the issue. . . . The survey also found that the more people did know, the more they tended to oppose what the FCC was doing. In other words, Big Media had an interest in keeping people uninformed.⁶⁵

The *American Journalism Review* undertook a content analysis of coverage of the FCC hearings in major media outlets for the first five months of 2003, prior to its June 2 vote to lift the cross-ownership ban. “While some newspapers produced a respectable flurry of stories in the weeks prior to the FCC’s action, the major networks – where most people get their news – acknowledged the issue only after protests in Washington had grown impossible to ignore.”⁶⁶ The *Columbia Journalism Review* concluded that the coalition between politicians and activists on both the left and right to oppose the FCC changes, which resulted from growing public concern about the narrow perspective of U.S. media following the September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent war in Iraq, had surprised even industry insiders. “It is not every day that the ideological lines get redrawn over an issue. . . . Media had become a political issue, as deeply felt as the economy, health care, or education.”⁶⁷

The question of censorship – or more significantly self-censorship – had been taken up by the *Columbia Journalism Review* several years earlier with a survey of journalists by the Pew Research Center. While direct censorship of the news by media owners was not found to be a problem, the more insidious forces of self-censorship were found to be “pervasive” among media gatekeepers. “Pressure from local power brokers may be less pernicious than the self-censorship of editors, producers, or reporters who simply choose a service story or an easier topic and shortchange their public.”⁶⁸ While the line between overt censorship and self-censorship often blurs, Pew interviews with journalists found that “subtle and not-so-subtle signals” define the boundaries of news.⁶⁹

Concern in the U.S. with the influence of press owners in shaping news content dates to at least the 1947 report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, which proposed self-regulation of the press in the form of “social responsibility” to forestall government regulation, which it concluded might otherwise be called for. The Hutchins Commission, as it was known, concluded that the news published in U.S. newspapers at that time was “twisted” by numerous influences, including the personal interests of owners.⁷⁰ The “exaggerated drives for power and profit which have tended to restrict competition and promote monopoly” had worked against the public interest, the commission concluded, and should be addressed by government action, if need be. “If the freedom of the press is to achieve reality, government must set limits on its capacity to interfere with, regulate, or suppress the voices of the press or to manipulate the data on which public judgment is formed.”⁷¹

Sociological studies of influences on journalists dating to the 1950s have shown the considerable impact of ownership on shaping the news. Breed’s 1955 study of

newsroom socialization revealed the mechanism of social control used by publishers to enforce adherence to a newspaper's editorial policy through the "slanting" of news stories. The enforcement of a newspaper's policy on certain issues, Breed concluded, was not achieved through the use of formal guidelines, but instead informally through a publisher's use of power over "mobility aspirations" of journalists.⁷²

"Slanting" almost never means prevarication. Rather, it involves omission, differential selection, and preferential placement, such as "featuring" a pro-policy item, "burying" an anti-policy item in an inside page, etc. . . . Policy is covert, due to the existence of ethical norms of journalism; policy often contravenes these norms. No executive is willing to risk embarrassment by being accused of open commands to slant a news story.⁷³

A study conducted in the 1960s and 1970s of major several U.S. news media outlets by Gans showed that while executives of media corporations have "virtually unlimited power" over news content, they are not able to exercise it continuously due to time constraints and their location outside the newsroom. According to Gans, however, this made the occasional intervention of ownership in news content all the more influential. "Their role in story selection and production is intermittent. . . . they do not exercise their power on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps because they do not do so, the journalists pay close attention to their periodic suggestions, and at times, they overreact."⁷⁴ As Shoemaker and Reese noted in their compendium of influences on news content: "The absence of visible attempts at control does not mean that none are being made. Whenever media workers deduce what their supervisors want and give it to them, de facto control has been exercised."⁷⁵

The Canadian Context

The increasingly concentrated ownership of the press in Canada was the subject of federal government inquiries that reported in 1970 and 1981. The Special Senate Committee on Mass Media chaired by Senator Keith Davey noted that ownership of Canada's dailies by the three largest newspaper chains had increased from 25 percent in 1958 to 45 percent in 1970. Forcing the chains to open their account books to public scrutiny for the first time, the Davey committee declared their profits "astonishing," at double the average of other manufacturing enterprises. "An industry that is supposed to abhor secrets is sitting on one of the best-kept, least-discussed secrets, one of the hottest *scoops*, in the entire field of Canadian business – their own balance sheets."⁷⁶ By 1970, "genuine" newspaper competition existed in only five Canadian cities, the Senate report noted, and the inexorable economics of the newspaper industry would inevitably lead to a lessening of competition and a tightening of ownership control.

This tendency could . . . lead to a situation whereby the news (which we must start thinking of as a public resource, like electricity) is controlled and manipulated by a small group of individuals and corporations whose view of What's Fit to Print may closely coincide with . . . What's Good For Business. . . . There is some evidence, in fact, which suggests we are in that boat already.⁷⁷

The Davey committee made several recommendations to stem the tide of increased concentration of press ownership in Canada and to foster independent voices in the media, including a Press Ownership Review Board to approve – or, more likely, disapprove – of newspaper sales or mergers, and a system of subsidies to encourage alternative publications. But after years of vigorous debate, neither recommendation was enacted, and Davey concluded, years later in his memoirs, that "we have in this country not the press we need, but rather the press we deserve. . . . The sad fact is that the media

must self-regulate because most Canadians are not prepared to demand the press they need.”⁷⁸

A decade later, an even more comprehensive review of press ownership in Canada resulted from the simultaneous closure on August 27, 1980 of dailies in Ottawa and Winnipeg by the Thomson and Southam chains. The events of “Black Wednesday,” as it became known, prompted a Royal Commission on Newspapers chaired by university professor and former journalist Tom Kent. It reported a year later with proposed limits on the size of newspaper chains, two of which by then controlled 58 percent of the nation’s dailies. “Newspaper competition, of the kind that used to be, is virtually dead in Canada,” reported the commission “This ought not to have been allowed to happen.”⁷⁹ The Kent commission proposed a Canada Newspaper Act limiting the number of dailies that could be controlled by one company in any region of the country. Due to expansion of the *Globe and Mail* from its Toronto base to a national daily through satellite distribution, it recommended that Thomson be required to choose between it and its other titles across the country. Reaction by publishers was furious, led by the *Globe and Mail*, which lambasted the Kent commission report as a “veritable idiot’s delight of interference in the ownership and operation of the nation’s press.”⁸⁰

Kent observed that the one-sided nature of press reaction to his commission’s proposed controls “fully confirms the analysis of the state of the problems of the newspaper industry.”⁸¹ But with an election looming, press controls were a perilous prospect for the Liberal government of long-time prime minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. A watered-down version of Kent’s limits on ownership was eventually tabled, but it died on the order paper with the transition to a Conservative administration in 1984. As a result,

Canada had by the mid-1980s the most highly-concentrated press ownership in the Western world.⁸² The exhaustive examinations of the Davey committee and the Kent commission within a decade of each other had not only failed to result in reform of press ownership, but they had perhaps served to prove the impossibility of instituting such reform in the face of press opposition to it. As the debate again died down in the mid-1980s, the multi-volume reports of Davey and Kent languished “dog-eared on Canadian bookshelves where they had been placed out of mind by a generation grown weary of the debate over press regulation.”⁸³

Conclusions

One of the strongest recommendations of the Royal Commission on Newspapers was against cross-media ownership. “Common ownership of different media in one community is clearly a restriction on competition, a lessening of the diversity of voices providing information and expressing opinion.”⁸⁴ But the successive failures of the Davey committee and the Kent commission to prompt reform left the door open for the expansion of cross-media ownership in Canada. With concentration of press ownership near a theoretical maximum, the only way remaining to effect corporate ownership efficiencies was through consolidation across media. One of the strongest arguments against the Kent commission’s proposed reforms was that, while it had chronicled the potential for the abuse of accumulated political power through increased concentration of press ownership, it had not proven that power had actually been abused, as the commission itself admitted.

We are concerned only about the special case of newspapers, the particular consequences of conglomeration on the way newspapers discharge their

responsibility to the public. The effect is to undermine their legitimacy; it is to create a power structure of which the best defence, on the evidence of the principal corporate proprietors themselves, is that they do not exercise that power.⁸⁵

Two decades later, the obvious exercise of ownership influence over the news published in Canadian dailies now renders Kent's caveat *passé*. Whether the influence is exercised directly or, more likely, indirectly through the more insidious mechanisms of socialization and self-censorship as outlined by sociologists Breed and Gans, the end result is the tailoring of news content to suit the political preferences of ownership. Given that the largest owner of daily newspapers in Canada is not only overtly political but also owns one of the largest television networks in the country, it is understandable why Canadians are seriously rethinking their traditional aversion to regulation of press ownership. Specific instances such as the scarcity of coverage attracted by news items that are not in the interests of ownership to publicize, such as the Lincoln report, will only serve to add credence to those who continue to call for reform.

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