

Cross-Media Ownership and Democratic Practice in Canada

Content-Sharing and the Impact of New Media

Walter C. Soderlund Colette Brin Lydia Miljan Kai Hildebrandt

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Cross-Media Ownership and Democratic Practice in Canada

To Walter Romanow and Florian Sauvageau

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Preface

THORSTEN QUANDT AND JANE SINGER (2009) have pointed out the difficulties involved in attempting to examine the impact of convergence on mass media through content analysis; namely that the subject has a nasty way of shifting ground very quickly. During the course of our study we came to appreciate the wisdom of their observation.

The research reported in this book began in 2006 as a straightforward attempt to document the amount of content-sharing that had been achieved by three major Canadian media companies (Canwest Global Communications, CTVglobemedia and Quebecor) that in 2000 realized the goal of cross-ownership of major television and newspaper properties. By the time we had analyzed the results of our 2007 content analysis of paired TV and newspaper stories from the above companies and began writing up the findings (presented in Part I of this book), it was clear that the focus of the research had to shift to explaining why convergence had not worked. The purported "synergies" that were clearly anticipated had not materialized, as television and newspapers are clearly (as various people associated with media industries told us) very different animals, reporters have minds of their own, and, in Quebec, a Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) regulation and restrictive labour contracts stood in the way of any implementation. As it turned out, not only was convergence unsuccessful in "reaggregating" media pieces, the debt incurred by Canwest's venture into cross-ownership arguably led, in 2009, to the bankruptcy of the company and yet another restructuring of the Canadian media landscape in 2010.

By the time we began conducting interviews with media executives in 2009, which had been conceived originally as adding some context

to the content analysis findings, we had in fact established a new set of goals. Thus, the interviews now included other media stakeholders, and focused for the most part on reasons why convergence had not worked, and especially where Canadian media industries were headed in the face of competition from "new media" and growing financial challenges brought about by the economic recession. These interviews provide the majority of material that appears in Part II. Our conclusions are that, with the important exception of Quebecor, content-sharing between television and newspapers is passé, and that both media are now pre-occupied with developing their own web applications, especially with finding ways to make the Internet profitable.

Many organizations and people are in line for thanks for our being able to do the research for this book, and none is more important than the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), which funded the project under grant 410-2006-0226. Also critical was an earlier financial contribution from Cecil Houston, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Windsor, that allowed Colette Brin to travel from Quebec City to Windsor to work on the SSHRC grant application. Also at the University of Windsor, Niharendu Biswas and Ranjana Bird (Acting Vice-President Research and Vice-President Research, respectively, during the period of the study) were always supportive of our efforts, as was Tom Najem, Head of the Political Science Department. At Université Laval we wish to thank especially Andrée Courtmanche, Research Coordinator at Faculté des lettres, for support in developing the project and helpful assistance at different stages of the research; Daniel Giroux, Secretary General of the Centre d'études sur les médias, for insights and constant collaboration; and Ulric Deschênes, Instructor at the Département d'information et de communication, for statistical analysis and various helpful suggestions.

We wish as well to thank our coders and those who helped us with data entry at both the University of Windsor and Université Laval. At Windsor thanks go to John Dubé, Steve Ovens, Andrea Anderson, and Daryl Ann Sdao for coding, and to Grantly Franklin and Daryl Ann Sdao for data entry. At Laval thanks go to Thierry Lavoie, Christelle Paré and Marie-Michèle Sauvageau for data entry and coding; to Olivier Bouchard, for design of the multimedia coding system and ongoing technical support; and to Marie Bédard, Justin Dupuis and Anne-Marie Brunelle for coding.

Of course, special thanks go to all those who agreed to interviews with us. We hope that we have accurately reported the views you shared with us.

Securing the necessary funding and actually carrying out a research study mean little unless the results find their way into the hands of interested readers by way of publication. For this crucial stage of the research we wish to thank Peter Midgley, Senior Editor (Acquisitions) for University of Alberta Press, Kirsten Craven, Copyeditor, and Mary Lou Roy, Production Editor, who oversaw the book's production.

Walter C. Soderlund Colette Brin Lydia Miljan Kai Hildebrandt

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1

Media and Democratic Covernance

THE START OF THE MILLENNIUM heralded a new age of media concentration in Canada. While for decades the newspaper industry had been engaged in ownership consolidation, these efforts paled in comparison to what began in 2000. In July 2000, Canwest Global Communications Corp., owner of the Global Television network, announced its intention to purchase the majority of newspapers held by Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. Then in September, Quebecor Inc. and la Caisse de dépôt et de placement du Québec made a public offer to acquire all the outstanding shares of Groupe Vidéotron Ltée, giving Quebecor control of the largest French-language television network in Canada in addition to its extensive English- and French-language newspaper holdings. 1 By November 2000, CTV Inc. had accepted a takeover bid from Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE), which BCE then combined with the Thomson-owned Globe and Mail to form Bell Globemedia. Thus, in less than six months' time all three of these companies combined major newspaper, television and Internet properties under one corporate umbrella in the hopes of "reaggregating media fragments" in order to create profit-generating synergies (Goldstein, 2002; also see Pitts, 2002).

This was but the start of moves toward convergence in Canadian media; more was yet to come. Most notably, the December 2005 acquisition by Torstar (the parent company of the Toronto Star, Canada's

largest circulation daily newspaper) of a 20 per cent ownership stake in Bell Globemedia,² owner of the *Globe and Mail* (arguably Canada's most influential newspaper) and CTV (Canada's most watched television network), not only put into play a potential content-creating juggernaut, it left only a handful of major Canadian newspapers not linked by ownership to a television broadcaster: the Halifax *Chronicle-Herald*, the Winnipeg Free Press and Power Corporation's La Presse and Le Soleil,³ plus Le Devoir (Bruser, 2005, Dec. 3).

Convergence, as a function of cross-media ownership, has been portrayed by its critics as a horrendous outcome for both a free press and the democracy it serves. At the same time, it has been seen by its proponents (mainly owners of these media) as the saviour of mass media in an age of "narrowcasting," the impact of "new media," and, perhaps most important of all, diminishing profits.

Most scholars who have addressed the problem see the impact of concentrated media ownership on democratic practice as leading to negative outcomes. Democratic theorists dating back at least as far as John Milton [1608-1674], John Locke [1632-1704], and John Stuart Mill [1806-1873] have looked at the critical relationship between the governed and those who govern. Out of this examination has evolved the proposition underpinning what has become known as the "Libertarian Theory" of the press-that good decisions tend to emerge from situations where there is an abundance of competing information. This in turn has provided the foundation for the classic "free market place of ideas" argument, wherein "good" information is said to prevail over "bad" (see Milton, 1971; Locke, 1965; Mill, 1955). In more recent times, this fundamental argument has been restated time and again (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947; Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956; Dahl, 1989; McQuail, 1992; Page, 1996). The following statement from the Declaration of Talloires, adopted by leaders of independent news organizations from twenty countries at the Voices of Freedom conference in 1981, catches the essence of the relationship: "From robust public debate grows better understanding of the issues facing a nation and its peoples; and out of understanding greater chances for solutions" (World Press Freedom Committee, 1981). In the Canadian context, the case has been reiterated in the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications' Final Report on the Canadian News Media:

To make informed decisions, citizens need a wide range of news and information. They also need access to a broad and diverse array of opinions and analysis about matters of public interest. Journalists are important providers of such information, as are the information media that transmit such material. This is why the freedom of the press is widely recognized as a central pillar of any democracy (Canada, 2006, italics added).

The power of mass media to influence citizen attitudes on questions of public policy, especially those that lie outside individuals' personal experience, has been established first through "agenda-setting" and more recently through "framing" (also referred to as "second level agenda-setting") research. This stream of media-effects research can be traced back to Bernard Cohen's much-quoted phrase that while the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think,...it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (1963: 14, italics in the original). In a 1968 study of voter attitudes, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw linked the salience of issues covered in mass media to what voters considered to be important and called this phenomenon agenda-setting. In more recent research, Maxwell McCombs and Amy Reynolds assert that "[e]stablishing this salience among the public so that an issue becomes the focus of public attention, and perhaps even action, is the initial stage in the formation of public opinion" (2002: 1), and indeed, over the years the agenda-setting effect has been confirmed in numerous research studies (see for example, Salwen, 1988; Rogers and Dearing, 1988; McCombs and Shaw, 1993; Kosicki, 1993; Weaver, 2007).

However, the power of mass media goes beyond the simple transfer of issue salience. Gadi Wolfsfeld, among others, has pointed out that in the reporting of news events, in addition to the raising of issue salience through repeated coverage over time, there is the phenomenon of framing—the interpretations that journalists place on the events they are reporting. Thus, reporting must be seen as a combination of information and interpretation (1997: 31–36). Moreover, in making sense of events for audiences, journalists tend to look for well-understood contexts in which to place breaking news—a prime example being the "communist menace" frame to categorize various left-wing reform movements during the Cold War, and more recently the "War on Terror"

frame to explain the US-led invasion of Iraq (for research on framing see Iyengar, 1991; Entman, 1993; Ghanem, 1997; Robinson, 2002; Entman, 2004; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

The significance of agenda-setting and framing for this study is that ownership, if it has a mind to do so based on concern for profit or ideology, can exert considerable influence not only on what the public considers to be important issues by controlling what "news" actually gets to be "news" (i.e., "gatekeeping"), but on how those issues are presented in terms of dealing with them. And there is no doubt that Canadians have access to a very narrow range of mainstream ownership options from which to glean their information and interpretations.

There is, however, a competing view that holds that some limit on content diversity is not necessarily a bad development for democracy. For example, Karl Deutsch (1954) has pointed out that a community's level of integration can be measured by the amount of "within-group" communication as opposed to "between-group" communication. And, of course, the type of extensive communication leading to the formation and maintenance of a "political community" depends in large part on a people having what are termed shared experiences (see Anderson, 1991).

First in a journal article (1995) and later in his widely cited study of civic disengagement in the United States, Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam linked media behaviour to what he termed "the erosion of America's social capital" (2000: 217). While stopping short of arguing cause and effect, he noted that "news and entertainment have become increasingly individualized....As late as 1975 Americans nationwide chose among a handful of television programs. Barely a quarter century later, cable, satellite, video, and the Internet provide an exploding array of individual choice" (2000: 216).

Donald Shaw and Bradley Hamm, however, did make an explicit connection between the decline of "mass media" and reduction in a sense of "national community." They argued that the cumulative effect of "newer communication technologies" was that individuals are able increasingly to seek out personal sources of information, enabling them:

- To listen to many sources of information other than those of mass media, which tend to cover the activities of those in power and official sources.
- 2. To locate other people like themselves....

- To gather and send information within a socially reinforcing group without suffering pangs of anxiety from separation from the larger community....
- 4. To participate in special groups that try to influence the larger society...or to withdraw from the larger society with little sense of social loss or obligation—to live in space, rather than a place (Shaw and Hamm, 1997: 222).

In the context of the contemporary Canadian media scene, media analyst Kenneth Goldstein has also challenged the view that having a wide diversity in points of view is necessarily helpful to democracy. He argues specifically that

[i]n Canada and the US, broadcasting may already have passed its peak as a shaper of our shared experience. While broadcasting will continue to be a major influence on our experience, the fragmentation of the medium may at the same time be reducing the amount of that experience that is common or shared (Goldstein, 2004: 14, italics added).

Taking Goldstein's argument a step further, Maria Simone and Jan Fernback make the point that a growing number of information sources may in fact hinder the development of a democratic public sphere:

fragmentation can result in a series of enclaves, with publics that may fail to engage each other in meaningful deliberation. This situation does little to address the fact that while each public maintains its own shared identity and ideology, the national and international spheres must include each of these publics in ongoing national debate (2006: 302–303).

A Business Week editorial agrees, suggesting that niche media outlets tend to reinforce and amplify "preexisting points of view, making compromise—the essence of a working democracy—harder than ever to achieve" (2004, July 12).

Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese (1991) have argued convincingly that media impact stems from the *content* that they disseminate and a wealth of research has established that mass publics rely primarily on media for their information on important issues. In this context, most scholars agree that media play a crucial role in the functioning of representative democracy. However, with the ongoing fragmentation of both mass media audiences and media platforms, is the strategy of convergence—the attempt to "reaggregate the fragments"—necessarily one that will harm democracy in a country such as Canada that is already characterized by significant cultural and regional divisions?

Whatever the case, it is clear that media ownership convergence, defined for the purposes of this book as combining television and newspaper properties under one corporate owner, can lead to content-sharing strategies among its different media platforms-in fact, content-sharing is an often stated intention and purpose of convergence. This, in turn, very likely would reduce the overall number of divergent viewpoints available to Canadian citizens as they make decisions regarding political leadership and questions of public policy. We must bear in mind, however, that the relationship between diversity of information and democratic practice is complex, and we cannot assume that more diversity in media content is necessarily a "good" thing. The key issue then revolves around how much diversity of information is optimal for the reasonable functioning of democracy, and, as the debate outlined above demonstrates, this is not an easy question to answer. Nevertheless, we submit that an ownership convergence of the magnitude experienced in Canada since 2000 signalled no less than a fundamental transformation in the ownership structure of mass media in the country and that the impact of this change on democratic practices needs to be assessed.

Convergence: Implications for Democratic Practice

In addition to the previously examined debate over how much diversity in views as expressed in mass media is good for democracy, two further arguments in defense of media ownership convergence have been advanced:

- that there are a vast number of media outlets available to Canadians, and
- · that media owners are not interested in controlling content.

Let us examine briefly the validity of both these arguments.

Canadians have a large number of media outlets available to them

It has been noted by many media observers that Canadians now have access to more sources of information than ever before; cited in these arguments are the presence of the "new media," especially satellite television and, of course, the ever-growing Internet. Charles Dalfen, then Chair of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), in testimony before the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications, explained that "in practically every medium, you will find that there are a larger number of owners and a larger number of broadcasting and newspaper outlets over...[the]...10-year period [1991-2001]" (Canada, 2004: 66). Of course, Canadians are not restricted to their own media; as Kenneth Goldsteinhas noted, the number of Canadians registered with the New York Times website, nytimes.com, exceeded "the average daily circulation of any daily newspaper in Canada" (2002: 3). As a result, primarily due to the growth of these new sources of information, National Post columnist Marni Soupcoff did not see ownership convergence as problematic: "When one looks at the media as a whole (cable and satellite television, radio, daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, Internet sites, web-based newsletters), there are more voices available to Canadian consumers than ever before" (Soupcoff, 2003, Oct. 8, italics in the original).

Not all observers, however, are convinced by this line of argument. Robert McChesney, writing about the media situation in the United States, specifically argued that ownership convergence works to nullify the myriad of voices that might be seen to be resulting from the addition of new media outlets. He pointed out that "[m]erely being able to launch a website is not sufficient to contend with the enormous market advantage of the media giants as they colonize the Internet" (2000: xxii). In the Canadian context, David Taras claimed that "[s]imply having a larger assortment of the same thing is not the same as having many different choices" (2001: 2). Vince Carlin added his concern: "While corporate strategies have been cloaked in the language of innovation and consumer choice, the results have so far been the restriction of choice and the postponement of innovation" (2003: 56; also see Mills, 2003, Feb. 13–15; Horwitz, 2005; Edge, 2007).

The question here is that if multiple media platforms (newspapers, television networks and Internet sites) are controlled by the same owner