

Canadian Journalism: Then and Now

The late Marjorie Nichols (d.1991), a tough, fair-minded, controversial, Canadian political commentator, complained that reporters today think that scandal-mongering is journalism. She commented, "They are wrong. The art of journalism is the art of synopsis, and that art form has been lost. It's sort of like stone carving. Cave wall painting. It's gone." She was right. Perhaps we all felt how low journalism can sink, when President Clinton's alleged sordid affairs with Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky made daily headlines for days on end. Much of today's journalism has degenerated into mere commerce; depth is lacking, and the news is regarded as what is most saleable to boost popular appeal. The distinction between the serious and popular press is still current, although increasingly blurred. Some dailies resemble tabloids, rather than serious and literary dispensers of news and commentary.

History of Canadian journalism

Canadians do not read as many newspapers, proportionally, as our American neighbours. Most of our papers, like most of theirs, are community journals. They are small, unambitious, and serve as community billboards and advertising sheets. The Canadian press is distinct from its American cousins. Its British roots are still noticeable, despite the strong influence of the American press culture. And like the American press of the past, the early Canadian press also had a distinctly Christian ethos.

The earliest form of journalism in English dates back to the "pamphlet wars" of the 1590s. Pamphlets were written to oppose or defend religious or political ideas. The Marprelate controversy was the most famous of the pamphlet wars. Marprelate was the pen-name of the anonymous author or authors of a series of pamphlets written from a Presbyterian standpoint which appeared in 1588-90, denying the validity of bishops and attacking the unscriptural government of the church by crown-appointed bishops.

After the abandonment of censorship in 1695, newspapers and weekly periodicals began to flourish. The first English daily, the *Daily Courant*, a mere news-sheet, began in 1702. Of the daily papers founded in the 18th century, the *Morning Post* (started in 1772) survived until 1936. The *Times* (started in 1785) is today the daily with the greatest prestige, though with a comparatively small circulation. This paper was originally written for the educated only. Even in the 1820s it printed details of atrocious murders or sex crimes in Latin. It was not until the abolition of the stamp duty (a tax on newspapers) in 1855 that newspapers became popular and affordable reading fare for all British citizens.

Immigrants from the British isles brought their tradition of a free press with them to Canada. The first daily newspaper in Canada - and North America - was the *Daily Advertiser* of Montreal, founded in 1833.

Donald R. Gordon, who had personal experience as a journalist for Canadian Press and CBC news, states that our daily newspapers come down to us carrying six distinct

traditions: a tradition of free and private enterprise; a tradition of service; a tradition of opinion; a tradition of variety; a tradition of advertising; and a tradition of conservatism. Journalists saw themselves as "serving" their readers, their communities, and their country. They were promoters of causes, providing personal comment on the individuals and issues of the day.

Journalists were not objective. By 1857, Canada East and West had 213 newspapers, most of them weeklies, and most of them with a strong political bias. Some of the early newsmen were politicians. Amor de Cosmos founded a paper, which became the *Victoria Colonist*, to launch him on his way to a premiership in British Columbia. Quebec nationalist Henri Bourassa, the founder of *Le Devoir*, did not resign from his newspaper post when he plunged into politics, and neither did Claude Ryan, his "spiritual successor" in 1978. Early Canadian papers were blatantly partisan. In a History of Journalism in Canada, W H. Kesterton quotes a rather frenzied headline from the May 2, 1833, *Colonial Advocate*:

Glorious Triumph!!!
DOWNFALL OF THE UPPER CANADIAN OLIGARCHY!
AND COMPLETE SUCCESS OF
LIBERAL SENTIMENTS OVER TORY AVARICE!!!
Huzza for Reform!!! God save the KING!!!

The partisan, 13-explanation- point headline is now gone from Canadian journalism.

In 1913 Canada had 138 daily newspapers, serving eight million people. In 1980 there were 117 papers for 23 million people. The latter statistic is not a sign of a decline in interest in the press. Newspapers no longer function as political party and propaganda organs. It was because of their political partisanship that Canadian newspapers flourished in the 19th and early 20th century.

James A. MacDonald(1862-1923)

Canada has also a Christian newspaper heritage, which seems nearly forgotten in our time. The Rev. James MacDonald was a Presbyterian minister who made a significant national contribution as a writer in an age when Canadian literature was in its full flowering. He was also well-known as one of the finest orators in the nation. He spent five years as minister of Knox Presbyterian Church in St. Thomas, Ontario, and was counted among the "Presbyterian Progressives." He became a leader in late Victorian Canada who sought to perpetuate the influence of Canada's Christian heritage in a time of rapid modernization and secularism. The press was for him a platform to propagate his Christian views on church and society. He was convinced that the influence of Christ should pervade every dimension of human life. Personal and social regeneration could not be separated. He summarized his views on the role of the Christian press in forming public opinion in an editorial in the *Westminister* in 1897.

To [the religious press] the supremest thing in life must be the Gospel of Christ. Because he lived and died and rose again, Lord of Life and Saviour of men, there is hope for the lowest and help for the worst. In the light of the Cross, life's enigmas are to be read, and by the Power of the Risen One life's burdens are to be borne. That is the gospel of the religious press; and its confidence is this: "God and the soul stand sure." This is its creed: All life is sacred, all interests are religious, all service is Christian; and this is its claim: All things are ours - industry, commerce, learning, literature, politics, all are ours, and we are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

MacDonald believed that the daily newspaper has a vital role in the affairs of the world. It reached "into all the earth, [and was] the teacher of the public mind, the organ of public opinion, the university of the common people." In 1903 he resigned as editor of the *Presbyterian* to manage the country's leading Liberal daily the *Toronto Globe*, but continued to play an important role in the life of his denomination. In MacDonald's time the *Globe* was still considered a paper sympathetic to evangelical Christianity. As a matter of fact, there was still a general consensus among editors of the daily press that Christianity was the "social cement" of the nation and the "chief cornerstone of civilization" that promoted "progress, enlightenment, and happiness."

By the time MacDonald accepted the editorship of the *Globe*, the daily press had become increasingly independent from partisan politics, so that he could be a real player on the political scene, instead of just a Liberal tool. MacDonald urged the Presbyterian church to have a broad view of evangelism. His aim was to reach into every area of life with the gospel. Nothing should be separated from the domain of Christ. He pledged himself to use his paper to oppose secularism in politics, industry, education, and religion. At Canada's Missionary Congress in 1909, he urged that "Men who themselves are thrilled by the Christ-life and inspired by the Christ-spirit and constrained by the Christ-motive must go into social life and into the business life and into the political life, and into other avenues of thought and life, and there live out the Christ-idea." Not everyone was thrilled with MacDonald's view. Someone wrote that it was scant wonder that a real evangelist like Jonathan Goforth got a cold reception during his 1909-1910 furlough from China.

At the congress of Canadian Presbyterianism in 1913, MacDonald spoke of the church's relation to the social and industrial situation in Canada. He challenged his church to witness the brotherhood of mankind through social radicalism, and to prove thereby that its love for men was more important than the numbers, wealth or social prestige of its members. Brian J. Frazer, Associate Professor of Church History, Vancouver School of Theology, comments that MacDonald aroused a significant number of people across the North American continent to interest themselves in the service of Christ's kingdom. However, says Frazer, his mission did not succeed. Materialism, secularism, and militarism overwhelmed MacDonald's ideals. And, I might add, his ideals are truly discredited by today's *Globe and Mail* with its liberal social agenda, advocating gay rights and favouring abortion on demand.

Objectivity

Objectivity belongs to the modern period. It was not until the 1930s that journalists were told that their reports should be objective. "Slanted" news was seen as lacking objectivity in selection and professionally inferior. In the 1960s this attitude came under widespread attack, and no more so than in the left wing of North American society. It was a time of upheaval and cultural ferment. When the children of the postwar baby boom entered secular colleges in the mid-1960s, they were given "a ground and vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise," greater than ever before. Canada saw the importation of what was called New Journalism from the United States. A new style of writing was developed, which put as much emphasis on the tempo and the style of the story as it did on the facts related. Though not in a conscious manner, the news grammar of film and television also entered the style of many reporters. The new style also revealed the biases of journalists. Abortion began to be labelled as the termination of pregnancy, abortionists "pro-choice," and pornography shops "adult bookstores." Journalists often sacrificed information and sometimes accuracy on the altar of "high style." Young reporters called for more active journalism, no longer wishing to slavishly follow the bent of publishers or the biases of editors. Objectivity was increasingly viewed as a screen which hid unexamined assumptions.

By the 1970s the word "objective" had disappeared from journalistic jargon all together. As Robert Fulford puts it: " All newspaper commentators - and to an extent reporters and deskmen, in their choice of what to emphasize - must function as moral philosophers in a casual and largely undisciplined way. They must make, in the course of their ordinary work, moral judgments and commitments of a kind which other professionals (setting aside judges and policemen) may have to face only occasionally, if ever."

An extreme but pointed illustration of filtering news through one's tinted lenses is the 1500-word story in Toronto's *Telegram* (closed down in 1971) about Nikita Khrushchev's mistress, based on a four-word sentence in an Associated Press story out of Moscow, for which there was no confirmation whatever.

The revolutionary 60s

In the 1960s, Canadian culture began to unravel. Many no longer knew what was the common good, or how to live and function as a community. Many no longer were sure what the nation should believe in or stand for. Individualism became rampant. Individual rights talk was part of journalism's new vocabulary. Secularism triumphed. The media began to discredit the Christian faith. The politics of gender, race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism became dominant. The insistence upon instant self-gratification, the breakdown of the family, and dwindling church attendance sowed confusion.

Journalists, influenced by the visual media, began to judge politicians more by their image than by the content of their politics. The preoccupation with an image and the political bias of reporters were clearly evident in the reporters' attitude toward former Prime Ministers Joe Clark and Pierre Elliott Trudeau. They were out to get Clark. The

press portrayed him as a bumbler, a plodder, a prairie boy. When Prime Minister Joe Clark was asked in 1980 whether he was willing to send troops to the Persian Gulf region in reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Clark replied that he was willing to consider all possibilities, including that one. In the *Globe and Mail* it came out as "Prime Minister Joe Clark said yesterday he is not ruling out the possibility of sending Canadian troops to Gulf." That in turn produced a headline reading: "Could send troops to Gulf, PM says." But all what Clark did was to refuse to remove the possibility from the list of options.

Trudeau, on the other hand, could do no wrong. He was depicted as a suave, brilliant, dynamic, intellectual, social activist and a fiscal liberal saviour of the nation. He kept the press in awe. Roy MacGregor, formerly with the Parliament Press Gallery, observed that the Ottawa press corps privately confided that they would prefer an evening dining with Clark - even if he did drink Coke with overdone steak - than with Trudeau, but this sentiment never surfaced in print. Whenever Clark made a move the press didn't approve of, it was reported. When Margaret Trudeau was seen smoking marijuana in the National Press Club, the Ottawa reporters kept mum. Not a word was written.

The power of the Canadian press

Prolific writer and Whig politician Edmund Burke (1729-97) is reported to have once said of the press gallery in the British House of Commons, "Yonder sits the Fourth Estate, more important than them all." Burke was right. The press is powerful. It was powerful then; it is powerful today. But how well does the press serve the Canadian nation? How free is it? One of the liveliest papers with outspoken editorials from a conservative perspective is Western Canada's weekly news magazine, *Western Report*. Ted Byfield, its editor, doesn't mince words in championing freedom of expression and public religious practice, and opposing political correctness. But his paper is a rare exception. Most papers are driven by the profit-competition motive, which prevent editors from turning out provocative articles. The profit motive is so thoroughly entrenched that it is impossible to attract a readership without trying to please its tastes. Content is not important. Nearly 30 years ago the Special Senate Committee on the Mass Media reported: ". . . forget content - because in the strict economic sense, that is not what the media are selling." The committee discovered that "the content - good or bad, timid or courageous, stultifying or brilliant, dull or amusing - is nothing more than the means of attracting the audience." And so the public was told that the media exist as "message-bearers for people who want to sell something." Today's press promotes consumerism, a materialist lifestyle, anything for the greatest good of our consumers' society.

Large and wealthy corporations are now owners of Central Canada's English daily newspapers, the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Financial Post*, and the *Toronto Sun*. The *Globe* is owned by the Thomson Corporation, one of the world's most powerful media empires, which control numerous newspapers across North America. Since 1963, the *Globe* has distributed the *Financial Times of Canada*, which is also controlled by Thomson business interests.

In 1992, the Canadian Daily Newspaper Association stated that nearly 60 per cent of the circulation of Canada's newspapers was controlled by Southam, Thomson, and the Toronto Sun publishing companies. This concentration of power in the hands of a few powerful corporations is a threat to the freedom of the press. There is now little difference between the papers. Joe C. W. Armstrong's *Farewell the Peaceful Kingdom. The Seduction and Rape of Canada, 1963 to 1994* exposes this perilous situation. He mentions that during the crucial constitutional debates all four of Canada's central major papers shamelessly manipulated the content of the news for their own purposes, arranged the timing of press reports to suit their corporate objectives, and deliberately ignored particularly important items. Armstrong also notes the lack of sharp differences in overall editorial policies. The papers now try to please all sides. He observes:

These centralist papers are all much the same: a mulligatawny stew, each with its so-called left-wing and right-wing reporters. For twenty years, none of them has ever seriously attacked another, exposed another, or even teased another. It simply isn't done.

Giving account

With a few exceptions, the Canadian press (I am not referring to church papers) has left behind its Christian heritage. How will the modern press pass the scrutiny of God? All authors will have to give an account to God. An awesome thought! How will Christian journalists fare? Do they still have a chance to make a difference for the Lord in our secular times?

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