

MERCY KILLING OF THE STAR WEEKLY:
THE F.P.-SOUTHAM-STAR SYNDROME

by Earle Beattie

As 1973 drew to a close, one more casualty in the Canadian magazine field was ushered off the stage like a true-life stereotype of old Father Time himself. It was the 64-year old Star Weekly, once published by the Toronto Star alone but, since 1965 by a consortium of The Star and Southam Press called Southstar Publishers Ltd.

Employees were given the usual jolly Christmas notice that the magazine would pack up in two weeks time. Some severance pay was provided and one or two out of 10 had immediate offers within the Southstar organization which publishes The Canadian and Canadian Homes. Others faced unemployment.

For the old Star Weekly, the end came as a mercy killing of this once bold magazine. It had been one of the best of magazines and one of the worst. At its best it gave expression and employment, staff and freelance, to hundreds of Canadian writers, editors, photographers and artists. Among the former were Morley Callaghan, Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Hemingway who wrote for it in 1922 and 1923 when he was a reporter for the Toronto Star.

At its worst, the SW bought up batches of pot-boiled fiction and photos from New York agents for publication. Fiction writers in Canada often received a photo or two and were asked to write a short story around them. One told how he had received a description of a photo on the phone one day. "I don't even get to see the photo any more," he said.

The rotogravure section came to be known as "Snakes and Eskimos" because the editor seemed to just love scenes of Indian snake-charmers and Eskimos with dog-sleds and igloos. Other photos were meaninglessly juxtaposed on the pages and cropped to fit the space. Yet the readers for a long while seemed to enjoy simply looking at exotic pictures for their own sake. Cut-lines, painfully written to fit two or three lines of type to the last pica were based on no information.

A very thin ghost of the Star Weekly may be found today in The Canadian Magazine. And how all this

came to be and how it relates to Weekend, its co-operating competitor, is an interesting tale of corporate manoeuvres in the mass media field. It involves The Montreal Star and its magazine The Standard (replaced by Weekend), The Toronto Star and The Star Weekly, the Southam company, Southstar, The Canadian, and Magna Media.

The Toronto Star began publishing The Star Weekly in 1910 as a robust national magazine that attracted an increasing number of readers and advertisers. Some years later, the Montreal Star began publishing The Standard as a competitor in the weekly magazine field reaching for a national audience. Articles on Canadian social issues made it journalistically outstanding, but it was unable to reach the circulation heights of The Star Weekly. Then in 1951 someone got the bright marketing idea, probably borrowed from models in the U.S. to convert The Standard into a weekly supplement called Weekend to be inserted in daily papers across Canada and to divvy up the net profit. It was and is printed in Montreal and shipped out in bulk lots to various newspapers with the name of the newspaper on the first page as though that paper had run it off in its own plant. (We recall a Letter to the Editor of the London Free Press praising the local paper for the fine content of Weekend and how local editors were to be congratulated on producing it. The F.P., owned 25% by Southam, now inserts The Canadian.)

As Weekend began appearing in more and more newspapers, its built-in circulation obtained a free ride with the circulations of all the host papers and it soon overtook and passed the Star Weekly. Naturally, this did not sit well with the Toronto Star and so in 1965 it made an arrangement with the Southam company (13 daily newspapers owned, interests in 4 others, 44 trade magazines, 19 annuals, a large printing operation, interests in recording, radio and TV, cable and trade shows), to publish a rival supplement.

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Naturally, the Southam papers dropped Weekend and thereby cut into its circulation, but Canada's other big chain, Free Press Publications, owned by the Sifton family and the late Max Bell, oil millionaire, (9 dailies, one farm paper, interests in cable and TV) stayed with Weekend so that the two supplements emerged with about equal circulation around the two million mark. Weekend also published a French-language edition called Perspectives.

Back to the Star Weekly. It, too, came into the Southstar operation, in withered form. The Canadian was shipped in bulk from the Montreal plant to Toronto and what could be called the SW was inserted in this national supplement: three sections, "Canadian Panorama" (news-features), a third-rate novel and comics, all printed in Toronto. The Canadian/Star Weekly was sold on news-stands only and by subscription, picking up a little business from those who got Weekend or no supplement in their home-city paper.

Southstar's "The Canadian Magazine" is printed in Montreal interestingly enough on the same press that runs off its rival, Weekend. Somewhere along the line it obviously occurred to the cost-accounting boys that the press running off Weekend and idle for part of the week might as well run off The Canadian Magazine. In the United States, Congress had to pass The Newspaper Preservation Act to allow competitive papers to share their machinery, but in Canada no such procedure was needed.

Having become bedfellows in the printing plant, the two rivals next saw another opportunity in sharing the same shower to conserve energy and money: they created an Advertising Sales Agency called Magna Media to sell ads for both Weekend and The Canadian. The ad agency, as subsidiary for not only The Canadian and Weekend, but for Canadian Homes, Perspectives and another Sunday version of Perspectives known as Perspectives-Dimanche, was in a nice position to provide advertisers with a beautiful package deal. Competition for other magazines or potential newcomers must be tough.

We wonder how this stands up with the Combines Investigation Branch of the Consumer Affairs Department in Ottawa?

The story does not end there. In August, 1973, Weekend Magazine along with its parent, The Montreal Star, fell into the Free Press Publications chain. As the F.P. papers had been strong supporters of Weekend when the dark shadow of The Canadian descended on it, the merger seemed only inevitable. Now Weekend has more corporate muscle behind it even as The Canadian has. And, of course, Southam's purchase of The Montreal Gazette which countered F.P.'s purchase of The Globe and Mail has now been countered by the F.P.'s purchase of the Montreal Star. But both cooperate in Magna Media and the printing plant, even as they cooperate in Vancouver through Pacific Press which prints The Sun and the Province. Very neat.

In all this merry-go-round of High Finance in the Mass Media Field, where does the public get off? Enormous savings have been made in these magazine ventures and the profits of the corporations involved have been substantial. Southam Press had a reported 1972 revenue of \$158 millions, 27 per cent higher than in 1971 and a net profit increase of 38 percent to \$14 millions. For the first half of 1973, net profit was up 31 per cent to some \$9 millions.

F.P. Publications, being privately owned by beneficiaries of the estate of Max Bell, a multi-millionaire oil man, R. Howard Webster, a Montreal industrialist, the John W. Sifton estate and R.S. Malone, president of F.P., has not easily-available figures for comparison.

Despite the high net profits by Southam, The Toronto Star and the owners of the Montreal Star, both The Canadian and Weekend have declined in quality when compared with their forebears, The Standard and The Star Weekly. Today they are both mediocre. Four causes may be cited: 1. The division of the

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profit pie between the Supplement companies and the local newspaper owners with the latter demanding bigger slices and the result that not enough money goes into editorial excellence; 2. The supplement is actually a give-away not sought by all readers and coming into homes uninvited it is not valued by them or by advertisers; 3. The automatic circulation increase leads to a built-in law of mass media, the bigger the circulation the more conservative the content as editors respond to a large common denominator, and 4. Backward-marching publishers of many dailies become censors who have the power to throw the supplement out of their papers if they find the articles are too outspoken. As the Biggest Journalistic Gun in

Town, the local publisher perceives the Supplement as The Stranger. Even in more independent days, The Stranger anticipated Bigmouth and seldom or never showed his gun. Now he's in the family.

In U.S. weekly supplements such as "This Week," this circuit of Communication and Feedback, whether overt or inferred, has proceeded to the point where the magazine has become mush.

The entire situation raises questions concerning mass media in the modern industrial state, more basic than dealt with here, but discussion of that will have to be reserved for a later issue.

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WHAT ARE THE QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS?

Taking Marshall McLuhan's observation that twentieth century man is someone running down the street shouting, "I know all the answers! What are the questions?" I asked students in my class on Communication and Mass Media at York University to submit one question in writing per seminar. Here are some of the questions that are as informative as answers. (Editor)

- If the State enforced tighter controls on property acquisitions and transactions with the newspaper industry, would the public as a whole obtain better news reporting?
- Isn't it sometimes important to stir the emotions in reporting without tampering with the facts because people can then be moved to act, to feel empathy, to understand?
- Don't the editors of Time magazine have strong enough principles to reject distorted news?
- Are the dispatches from local papers to C.P. edited and if so does that mean the news content in Eastern Canada could vary from the news content in Western Canada?
- I disagree with a statement in Media Mosaic that "sensationalism does not sell newspapers anymore." A prime example is the Toronto Sun.
- Senator Keith Davey's report states that media owners say they are mere spectators which of course is not true for they control the presentation of the news, but I wonder...how about the public? Are we mere spectators or can we change what is being presented in the paper?
- In what way can we retain private enterprise in the mass media along with some monopolies and yet maintain open, free and divergent expression of opinion reflecting what is best in a democracy?
- McLuhan has been accepted as a communications philosopher. Many of his phrases, i.e. "The medium is the message" may be interpreted in various contexts, depending on one's own experiences. Is this relevant communication?