

When Head Office Was Upstairs: How Corporate Concentration Changed a Television Newsroom

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Abstract: This paper undertakes a case study into the impact of corporate concentration on the newsroom at CKCK (CTV) Television in Regina, Saskatchewan. By comparing the newsgathering operation from the late 1980s with the one in operation today, changes to the organizational and technological structure of CKCK Television are pinpointed with respect to the effects on the work lives of journalists. This is accomplished through interviews with past and present employees and by observing the newsroom environment as it exists today. Through an assessment of daily work structures and the controls that are institutionally imposed, the manner in which journalists serve the public good is considered and questioned.

Résumé : Cet article entreprend une étude de cas sur l'impact qu'a eu une convergence d'entreprises sur la salle des nouvelles de la station de télévision CKCK (CTV) à Régina au Saskatchewan. En comparant la collecte de l'information dans les années 1980 à celle de nos jours, l'article souligne comment les changements apportés à la structure organisationnelle et technologique de CKCK ont modifié le travail des journalistes. L'article atteint ce but au moyen d'entretiens avec des employés, tant anciens qu'actuels, et de l'observation de la salle des nouvelles telle qu'elle est aujourd'hui. En évaluant les structures établies pour le travail quotidien et les contrôles imposés par la station, l'article met en question combien les journalistes aujourd'hui sont réellement libres de servir le bien commun.

Keywords: Broadcasting; Media/Mass media; Ownership (concentration/competition); Television news

Regina's CKCK Television newsroom used to be a study in noise. Late afternoons would see a dozen reporters and writers rushing to meet a looming deadline, literally pounding out words on heavy-duty manual typewriters, the cacophony punctuated by the screech of audio and videotape being dragged back and forth over

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playback heads in a search for in and out cues. Snippets from police and fire department communications would break through the din, picked up by a radio scanner with the volume on maximum. Photographers would be dropping off tapes to reporters and editors and stopping to ask the assignment editor about the following day's work. News anchors, producers, and reporters would be shouting out questions and answers about facts and figures, clarifying the details for the *News at Six*, the most-watched newscast in southern Saskatchewan.¹

That was in 1989. A decade and a half later, the CKCK newsroom is a dramatically different place. The soft click of computer keys has replaced the clatter of manual typewriters. The videotape editors and news photographers are gone, casualties of cutbacks and reorganization. Reporters quietly edit their own stories behind closed doors. There is nobody at the assignment desk. Only the radio scanner remains, blasting out disconnected bits of emergency service chatter.

This before-and-after snapshot of CKCK is a small illustration of the massive changes that have roared through Canada's television newsrooms over the past two decades. Where once there were independently owned local voices reporting on matters of concern to communities, now there are branch plants owned by huge corporations. In fact, CKCK does not exist anymore. It is now known as CTV Regina. Like its counterparts in larger centres such as Calgary, Winnipeg, and Halifax it has become a re-branded outlet for a network based in Toronto (Canada, Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communication, 2004).

A changing media landscape

The changes at CKCK Television are undeniably tied to the great round of corporate acquisitions and mergers of the 1990s, what David Taras (1999) has called a "tidal wave" of media convergence and concentration. Indeed, the station's ownership history is worth outlining briefly because it reads so much like a textbook illustration of the path to corporate concentration described by writers such as Taras. CKCK was founded by the legendary Sifton family in 1954 and sold to Harvard Developments in 1976, a local company owned by Regina's Hill family. It was a private sale reputed to be in the range of \$6.5 million.² Harvard, in turn, sold its television assets to Baton Broadcasting of Toronto in 1987. The sale price to Baton was in excess of \$40 million. Baton Broadcasting, headed by Douglas Bassett, already owned the other CTV-affiliated stations in Saskatchewan. His Prairie holdings, plus the Bassett family's ownership of Toronto's mighty CFTO Television, gave Baton the leverage it sought to begin a takeover of the CTV network. Eventually, Baton would become the biggest player on the CTV board. By the late 1990s Baton and the other large players remaining in the old CTV structure had merged into a new corporation. They became the "new" CTV. Bell Globemedia bought this corporation in late 2000 (Shecter, 2004). Therefore, in the span of scarcely more than a decade, CKCK Television went from being a medium-sized, locally owned station to being a very small holding within the television division of a multi-billion-dollar media empire.

This pattern of acquisition, reflected in the example of CKCK Television, would seem to offer a *prima facie* confirmation of the worst fears of those who are

critical of the emergent Canadian media landscape: namely, that a few very large corporate interests are now positioned to control virtually all journalistic content that emanates from privately owned television stations, radio stations, and newspapers across the land. Furthermore, these corporations have invested heavily in the technologies of convergence: the merging of television and radio, telephony, satellite, and cable networks, and, most notably, computer networks (Taras, 1999). Big companies are poised to control both the content of the daily news and the way it is delivered. As Taras rightfully points out, we have reached the point where “there is a fear that individual media, independent voices, and local and national expressions will be submerged—drowned in a deadly sea of conformity” (Taras, 1999, p. 61).

These concerns reinvigorate a discussion that has been ongoing in Canada for the better part of four decades. It was, after all, the Senate Special Committee on Mass Media, chaired by Senator Keith Davey, that raised concerns in 1970 over increased cross-ownership among Canadian media and questioned whether large media corporations were dedicating sufficient resources toward producing Canadian programs (Canada, Senate Special Committee on Mass Media, 1970). The Royal Commission on Corporate Concentration of 1978 commented on the absence of legislation limiting ownership groups from taking advantage of dominant market positions. The oft-cited Royal Commission on Newspapers, chaired by Tom Kent, reported in 1981 that there was cause for concern when newspaper owners also owned broadcast outlets in the same market. Largely on the basis of the *Kent Report*, the federal government directed the Canadian Radio-television, and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) to withhold broadcast licences for newspaper owners who wished to run radio or television stations in markets dominated by their publications. The Mulroney government rescinded this directive in 1985.

The Davey and Kent reports continue to be widely quoted, particularly in policy circles. Both *The Interim Report on the Canadian News Media*, released in 2004 by the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communication, and the *Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, Our Cultural Sovereignty*, also published in 2004, refer to the Davey and Kent reports as founding documents that have established an area of ongoing concern. If there has been a heightened sense of alarm in recent years over corporate concentration in the media, it may come from the sense that, studies notwithstanding, any recommendations aimed at limiting the trend toward a Canadian media oligopoly have been largely ineffective. The Heritage Committee report, for example, acknowledges that “the top five ownership groups owned 68% of all television stations in 2000, up from 28.6% in 1970.” Perhaps more revealing is the acknowledgment that “single station ownership was far less common in 2000, with just six such entities” (Canada, 2004, p. 5). While the Heritage Committee report does outline a series of “potential solutions” aimed at addressing concerns over concentration of ownership, both reports imply that the manner of closing the barn door is up for discussion at a time when the frantic beat of hooves has long since given way to

the silence of the night. (For applicable contextual references to both reports, see Canada, 2004.)

Concerns in Canada over concentration of media ownership run parallel to concerns in the United States. As Ben H. Bagdikian (dean emeritus of the Graduate School of Journalism at Berkeley) has noted, the American media landscape is now dominated by what he has labelled “The Big Five”: Time Warner, Disney, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, Viacom, and the Bertelsman company of Germany (Bagdikian, 2004). Between them, laments Bagdikian, they are a true oligopoly, “the rule of a few in which any one of those few, acting alone, can alter market conditions (Bagdikian, 2004, p. 5). More to the point, the American example embraces corporations of such enormity and diversity—horizontally and vertically integrated companies that own publishing houses, film studios, television networks, cable systems, and production companies, to name but a few—that they constitute corporate empires in a position to “control every means by which the population learns of its society” (Bagdikian, 2004, p.4). With the acquisition in 2004 of the Craig Family holdings by the CHUM group, it might be argued that Canada now has a “Big Four”: Bell Globemedia, CanWest-Global, CHUM, and Quebecor, whose holdings dominate the Québec media landscape. For Canadian media scholars the American example is an indication of what could happen in Canada, with implications for democracy in this country that are clear and not very pleasant.

The concern (to rephrase Bagdikian’s central notion) is that conformity and hegemony go hand in hand, that an “elite group of super-rich businessmen” will grow so powerful in their control of the means by which Canadians engage issues of concern that average people will not have the information they need to participate fully in the democratic process (Lorimer & McNulty, 1992, p. 205). Even more chilling is the notion that average Canadians will be manipulated into an uncritical acceptance of a particular ideological point of view, one that reflects only the biases of the elite group. Emanating from this bias of ownership is the fear that voices of dissent from the community, especially those from marginalized groups, will be stifled. There is also fear that journalists who do not toe the company line, or who have ideas that differ from those in power, will lose their jobs, while those who conform will be rewarded and promoted into positions of influence (Schulman, 1990).

It is crucial that we continue to examine all of these concerns. However, the effect of corporate concentration and convergence on the role of the journalist is of paramount importance, since journalists are the bridge between the corporate interests that employ them and the public they serve. Any change to the working life of journalists is bound to influence the information that is delivered, information that citizens require to fully “participate in the debates from which political decisions rightly flow” (Garnham, 1990, p. 104). Journalists in the newsroom of CKCK Television have witnessed profound changes in recent years. Their experience provides a rare opportunity to critically examine how a loss of local autonomy has transformed the culture of a news organization and, by extension,

altered the quality of the news and information provided to the citizens of a community. Such an examination is a way to see where Taras' "tidal wave" has been and, by doing so, to offer a practical and concrete indication of where it is headed.

CKCK operations during the 1980s

Throughout the 1980s, CKCK was a very profitable local television station. The owners were content to leave the quotidian operations in the hands of a general manager who headed a management team that included the news director, a sales manager, a manager of promotions, and even a community liaison manager. For its part, the newsroom was based on a more or less standard (for the time) hierarchy that included a news producer and assignment editor, both of whom answered directly to the news director. A crew of six reporters answered, in their day-to-day work lives, to the producer and editor. There were three news anchors responsible for writing and presenting newscasts at noon, six o'clock in the evening, and eleven-thirty at night. The anchor for the six o'clock news was the *de facto* managing editor for that newscast, a common practice predicated on the notion that the person presenting the news should have ultimate responsibility for its accuracy. There were also three sports reader/reporters and a weather person who doubled as a "community affairs" contact. These 15 full-time employees were complemented by a number of part-time people including an agriculture reporter from a local radio station who produced a daily segment for the half-hour news program at noon. Other part-time workers helped out on weekends.

A crew of technical employees complemented the editorial staff. Five full-time television photojournalists and a small contingent of freelance camera operators collected images and audio from the field. Usually the photojournalists worked as a team with reporters, but they would often be sent out to record events that did not require a reporter's scrutiny. A good example of this kind of story would be the annual lighting of the City Hall Christmas tree, a ritual of great community importance but little journalistic significance. Two full-time videotape editors and a part-time person handled the editing and packaging of news material. It is worth noting that the people who managed CKCK made a conscious choice in the early 1980s to retain two employees whose jobs had been eliminated by technological change. One was a film laboratory technician, the other the chief of photography. Neither position was necessary after the switch from film to videotape.

The 25 people who formed the core of the news operation were themselves supported by studio camera operators, technicians who operated audio boards, video switchers and character generators, and the people who loaded tape machines and kept things organized in the video playback centre. This extended group of 35 was responsible for three daily half-hour newscasts (two on weekends), a weekly current affairs program, a community affairs program that ran each morning, and a half-hour program dealing in investigative journalism that was not technically a part of the news operation, but which used newsroom resources. In February of 1987, the news operation expanded when a program called *The Provincial* went on air. It was hosted out of Regina and Saskatoon and

had its own reporters and technical facilities in Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, and Yorkton. The Regina contingent for *The Provincial* employed six editorial staff including a producer, assignment editor, and three reporters. It also employed a production assistant. By the late 1980s, CKCK Television, in all of its departments, employed 122 full-time people and about 10 other part-time and freelance staff.³

This is a critical number. It means that CKCK Television was a serious, high-profile employer in Regina.⁴ The company had always promoted itself as a dedicated member of the community, and a certain kind of naïve but effective synergy was achieved when people who were seen on television showed up at the local grocery stores or at the movie theatres. Regina was just small enough, and CKCK popular enough, to make such “sightings” a fairly regular occurrence. Constant identification with the community, solid local news and information programming, an independent local voice affiliated as a member of the CTV “family,” and a reputation as a decent place to work all contributed to CKCK’s success. Through the 1980s the audience numbers soared, averaging around 80,000 viewers for the six o’clock newscast, almost half the population of the entire city.⁵

This response from members of the Regina community was deeply rooted in issues of trust and credibility. Viewers tuned in to the local newscasts for the daily assurance that they would be informed if anything out of the ordinary had happened in their community. The job of the journalists was to be vigilant and report with accuracy. Sins of omission were not treated lightly. This relationship between the CKCK news and its audience was, in effect, a working illustration of James Carey’s “ritual view of communication”: the newscasts, with their intention to inform and assure, became the daily, trusted “representation of shared beliefs.” Their strength was founded on the intention and the ability to deliver “a presentation of reality” that gave life in Regina an overall form, order, and tone (Carey, 1989, p. 21).

Protecting news integrity at CKCK Television

So strong was the connection between community expectations and the local news service that it was sometimes difficult to keep in mind that CKCK Television was (and remains) a commercial enterprise. Jobs and resources were dependent on viewers and the advertising revenues that audience numbers could generate. However, while there was never any question that the station was in business to turn a profit, there was also no question that any attempt to manipulate or interfere with the content of news stories or current affairs programs would not be tolerated. The reason was quite simple. Those who owned and managed the station understood that the entire station image was predicated on its delicate relationship with the community and that this was intimately linked to the credibility of its news and information programming. To protect the integrity of the news operation was unadulterated self-interest. Any hint that the “truth seeking” function of the newsroom had been compromised for commercial or political gain would have raised uncomfortable questions in the community and risked the erosion of viewer numbers.

This element of the CKCK corporate culture was so strong that the news operation was seldom told about attempts by external forces to alter or influence

news stories. External pressures were brought to bear from time to time, often (but not always) by big advertisers who threatened to cancel contracts because of news stories that were perceived to portray them negatively. However, it was thought by management that the mere knowledge of such an attempt would cause journalists to feel threatened and therefore pressure them to approach stories differently. The regard for station integrity was so deeply held that only now, after nearly two decades, are the details of one unusual and revealing incident coming to light. The case is unusual because it involved the owner of CKCK Television and his relationship with Regina's Roman Catholic community. The way the incident was handled illustrates how power was dispersed within the management structure and how that dispersal protected and supported the journalistic process. It shows a commitment to the integrity of the journalist in question and also recognition that the station's obligation to act in the public good outstripped other serious considerations.

The journalist's name was Roseanne Hill, the daughter of Paul Hill, owner of CKCK Television. She was interning in the newsroom when she uncovered a story concerning improprieties involving a local priest and a foundation he ran in support of troubled young people. Records of the Bosco Foundation, which supported a centre for troubled youth called Bosco Homes, revealed certain financial irregularities. In addition, some former wards of Bosco Homes were coming forward with charges of physical abuse.

These are the bare facts. To grasp the full implications of the story, a number of other critical pieces of information must be revealed. First, the priest in question was the equivalent of a living saint in the Regina community, renowned for holding a three-day annual fundraiser called the Big Valley Jamboree. The event had grown to the point where it was attracting some very big names in the music industry. As a result, the priest who had founded the event had acquired an international reputation. The people of Regina were justifiably proud of the Big Valley Jamboree. It put their community on the map. Second, the Hill family is devoutly Roman Catholic. Third, so is Frank Flegel, the CKCK Television news director at the time. Flegel recounts a meeting he was called to attend with station manager, Bruce Cowie:

He [Cowie] said he'd had a call from Paul Hill and that he [Hill] was really uncomfortable. He said he wanted Roseanne taken off the story. I told Cowie that this was Roseanne's story and there wasn't anybody else who had all the background. Cowie told me again that Paul Hill was really uncomfortable. That's all he said. I left his office and Roseanne stayed on the story. It was my newsroom and my decision. (personal communication, January 6, 2004)

Flegel makes it clear that removing Roseanne Hill would not have killed the Bosco story. It would have been reassigned. However, sooner or later it would have been known in the community that CKCK Television News had buckled under pressure, and questions would have been raised about the transparency of the process and whether the story was being told in its entirety. Because of the corporate structure in place at the time, Flegel was able to judge the integrity of the journalism to be more important than the reputation of a tarnished local saint, the

ramifications for Bosco Homes and the Big Valley Jamboree, the concerns of the Catholic Church, and the discomfort of his employer. Roseanne Hill followed the Bosco Homes story to its conclusion. Amid much controversy, the priest was eventually removed from all positions of influence with the Bosco Foundation and the Big Valley Jamboree. He quietly abandoned Saskatchewan for Alberta.

Would things have been different if someone other than the owner's daughter had been working on the Bosco Homes story? Possibly. However, other sensitive stories had received similar support. Why did Paul Hill choose to go through channels at a company he owned to request that his daughter be taken off the story? Clearly, given the organizational culture of CKCK, to do otherwise would have undermined the entire management structure, undercut the integrity of the news division, and tainted the credibility of all journalistic enterprise at the station. In a community the size of Regina, the reputation of the Hill family was intimately linked to the reputation of CKCK Television. Decisions made by the Hills, especially those deemed to be negative for the community, were open to scrutiny by members of the community. The Hills could be made to feel uncomfortable in their own place.

Changes at CKCK Television since the 1990s

Notions such as credibility, local integrity, and reputation within a community seem old-fashioned in the context of today's rough-and-tumble world of mass media empires. Yet it is precisely this condition of membership within a community and the expectation of responsible leadership under the scrutiny of the community-at-large that distinguishes the CKCK Television of 1989 from the one that operates today. While CTV Regina continues to broadcast into the community, and continues to extract revenues from the Regina market, all real power concerning corporate policy has been transferred to Toronto. Any member of today's extended Regina community—whether advertisers, average viewers, or special interests—would find it virtually impossible to negotiate the corporate labyrinth in order to speak to real decision-makers about their concerns. There is a distance in public accountability, both geographical and psychological, between the people who watch what CTV broadcasts into their community and the people who own the company.

This distancing was accomplished throughout the 1990s as successive absentee owners refined an organizational structure that retained the appearance of community involvement even as management became more remote and staff numbers were heavily reduced. The news operation was central to this plan. It should be noted that there is no evidence that the absentee owners at any time directly imposed journalistic policies that favoured a particular point of view or editorial stance. Control over what had been a more or less autonomous news operation was established through different means. Not least among those means were deep cuts to the number of people contributing to the station's journalistic programming and a resulting increase in responsibilities for those who kept their jobs. Where there were 122 full-time jobs at CKCK when it was locally owned, there are now 45. A news operation with 31 dedicated employees in 1987 now has

15, including a number who are on term contracts.⁶ Journalists who used to work with photographers and videotape editors now shoot and edit their own reports. There is no longer an assignment editor to consider stories, consult with reporters, and co-ordinate resources throughout the news day. There is no incentive to report on any but the most simple and straightforward matters of public concern.

Even as workers were laid off, every effort was made to preserve outward appearances. In effect, as the news operation and other departments were gutted, the veneer of the news presentation—the news sets, the news readers, electronically generated graphic material, and the daily promotional inserts—was retained, and in some cases enhanced. The ritual aspect of everyday viewing changed very little because it was difficult to *see* any difference in the way the news was presented. For the average viewer it was extremely difficult to judge whether the content of the newscast had changed, because this would require a daily assessment of what news stories were *not* being covered, a notoriously difficult prospect except in the most high-profile of cases.⁷

A drop in enterprise reporting

One measure of content change in the substance of daily news involves the presence or absence of “enterprise stories.” These are stories originated by reporters and deemed to have a greater than usual impact on the life of the community. Their investigative nature generally requires the commitment of resources, both human and technological, for extended periods of time. A brief inventory of enterprise stories from the years when CKCK Television was locally owned shows that this kind of journalism was an integral part of the newsroom culture, a culture that was generally unafraid to challenge the privileged and powerful.

One such story illustrates this point. It involves an incident during the murder trial of Colin Thatcher, a former Saskatchewan cabinet minister who was later found guilty of murdering his ex-wife. During the trial, Thatcher’s defence lawyer claimed that special bullets used in a previous attack on the victim were unavailable in Saskatchewan; therefore, his client could not be responsible for the attack and, indeed, harboured no violent disposition toward his former wife. The CKCK reporter covering the trial went to a local gun shop, purchased a box of the specialty bullets, and reported his findings. In an unusual turn of events, the Crown called the reporter as a witness and the defence claim was refuted.

This is a dramatic instance of enterprise reporting, but it is generally in thematic tune with other examples: an investigative report into the practices of slum landlords in Regina resulting in a government investigation; an investigation into the misuse of communications allowances by members of the legislative assembly that eventually culminated in criminal charges and jail terms for some prominent former politicians; a report on clinical trials of LSD conducted in the 1960s on members of the community without their knowledge or consent; the first report outlining concerns with the sustainability of the health care system in Saskatchewan and, by extension, in Canada; an investigation into a series of suspicious “accidental” deaths of children in the care of a woman charged with shooting a toddler she had “mistaken” for a rabbit in her vegetable garden; an

examination into the conduct of senior city officials who were later fired for using inside information to obtain desirable properties in a new, city-approved housing development. The list is extensive.⁸

Requests for a list of enterprise stories produced over the last five years went unanswered. Newsroom employees were reluctant to discuss the matter on the record. One employee, speaking anonymously, indicated that complex, investigative pieces do not get produced under the current newsroom structure because they are risky (there is concern over the possibility of lawsuits), their production requires the dedication of too many people, and they are too time-consuming. In short, it is generally easier, cheaper, and less risky to chase daily news stories than engage in enterprise reporting.

To be fair, much of the enterprise reporting that occurred prior to the cuts of the 1990s originated with a weekly, half-hour current affairs program produced in the newsroom. Investigative reports produced for this program (titled *This Week*) were often turned around for daily news purposes and cross-promoted within major newscasts. These enterprise stories were the work of daily news reporters who had been seconded to *This Week* in order to pursue matters of public concern in greater depth. Once the current affairs unit “broke the story,” these reporters could subsequently follow the issue to its conclusion in their daily news practice. This symbiosis of news and current affairs was supported by another organizational feature of the CKCK Television newsroom: specialized reporters assigned to beats. Specialized reporting on the provincial legislature, city hall, the police service, the courts, and other areas of interest inevitably created relationships in which sensitive material was more likely to be revealed. The news/current affairs structure within the newsroom made it possible to turn this sensitive material into enterprise stories.

The staff cuts of the 1990s eliminated *This Week*. The newsroom reorganization that followed dispensed with the system of beat reporters. Reporters in today’s newsroom are expected to be generalists. There is no programming vehicle to support them in the pursuit of enterprise stories.

The profit motive and management control

The journalists who today work for CTV Regina are more like free agents who sell their expertise under contract than members of a team working within a journalistic organizational culture. Many of the same rules apply, but with much more brutal efficiency. Wayne Mantyka is CTV Regina’s senior reporter, a journalist who has been in a position to observe the company grow and shrink over the past quarter-century. According to Mantyka, today’s newsroom operates under the same economic realities as it always has, only more so:

We get resources according to the profit we can generate. Calgary has a million people so they can generate more profit and have a bigger newsroom. We get one-third the resources of Calgary because we generate one-third the profit. We have to pay the bills. (personal communication, January 5, 2004)⁹

It is a simple equation, accepted by Mantyka and the other reporters at CTV Regina. None seem eager to discuss the huge control advantage that accrues to

management under such a profit-to-jobs paradigm. Since there is no mechanism for scrutinizing the books, management need only declare that profits are down to justify job cuts. Furthermore, the profit in question is not that generated by the newsroom. It is station profit and possibly even network profit. Conceivably, the CTV Regina news operation could be the most successful in the country yet still face cutbacks because other broadcast decisions, some in faraway places, failed to attract viewers. As for “trouble employees,” managers need only declare a profit shortfall to get rid of them. It is a crude but ever-present means of control.

An increase in journalist independence

However, staff reductions, reorganization, and the need to maintain appearances actually led to the *removal* of many of the control mechanisms that were built into the old CKCK newsroom hierarchy. The elimination of the assignment editor’s position means that journalists are now largely responsible for chasing down their own sources and shaping the editorial content of their stories. The net effect is a reduction in the kind of self-censorship that occurs when journalists disregard certain story ideas because they know, through experience, that those ideas will not make it through the editorial filter (Schulman, 1990). The news director remains in overall charge of the content of the daily newscasts but tends to act as a check and balance against legal and ethical considerations rather than as an active participant in crafting the presentation. Likewise, editorial responsibilities have been stripped out of the news producer’s role and replaced by responsibilities that are mainly concerned with studio directing. The journalists at CTV Regina (within significant boundaries) have been handed a great deal of editorial independence over their own work.

A second set of conditions arising out of staff cutbacks and reorganization has contributed to the perceived independence of journalists at CTV Regina. In 1999, the station eliminated all but one of its photojournalists (news camera operators). This reduction in the number of photojournalists followed the elimination of videotape editors some years before. Reporters trained to research, shoot, write, and edit their own stories—video-journalists in the parlance of the industry—replaced the five photography positions. In effect, each video-journalist took on the responsibility for three different workers. Yet for senior reporter Wayne Mantyka, this change has been viewed not as an imposition, a loading on of responsibility and expectations, but a new skill set to be embraced:

Reporters now have to carry equipment but no more than the photographers used to carry. Instead of asking the photographer to start and stop the camera at a news conference, we now push the button. Where we anticipate having to jockey for position, like we often do at large scrums, two video-journalists are dispatched to handle the situation. One shoots; the other acts as reporter. (personal communication, December 12, 2003)

This form of multi-tasking, accomplished through technology, extends to the functions formerly assumed by the assignment editor. CKCK’s reporters now carry cellular telephones equipped with voice mail. Messages are relayed directly to journalists without the mediations of an editor. In Mantyka’s words: “Reporters

can now arrange all of their interviews out in the field. It has really made things easier.” For reporter Jason Matity, the added responsibilities of shooting and editing are just a part of the job. With about seven years of experience, Matity has been around long enough to have worked with photojournalists and videotape editors, but has been a video-journalist for most of his working life. He admits that professional videotape editors can enhance the look of a television report, but there is a trade-off that greatly benefits video-journalists: they have “complete creative control” (personal communication, January 7, 2004). (It should be noted that reporters at CTV Regina have free access to Internet technology and each has been assigned a company e-mail address. However, virtually all admit that they prefer the telephone for tracking down sources and developing stories. The Internet is used mainly for confirming general factual details. In the world of the mobile video-journalist, portable telephony trumps computer networks!)

Elements that limit journalist independence

A sense of independence, ease in getting the job done, and creative control: these are the factors that give satisfaction to journalists working in the CTV Regina news operation. Yet for every factor that contributes to the independence of the working journalists in this environment there is a structural or technological element that constrains and limits that independence. Some of these elements are remnants of the old, hierarchical structure of the newsroom and are generally built into the daily ritual of all news organizations. Deadlines structure the workday, since news stories must be produced and delivered to the station for broadcast at specific times. Daily news meetings offer an opportunity for reporters to exchange views and information, but also provide a forum for managers to influence the kinds of stories that will be covered. These embedded organizational structures act to control both the movements of journalists and the kinds of stories they produce. They limit independence and always have. However, in the new, streamlined CTV Regina newsroom, the traditional constraints on independence have been augmented by some of the very technologies that are regarded by journalists as enhancing their independence.

The technological connection provided by the cellular telephone, for example, certainly provides a level of ease and efficiency to the news gathering process, but it is also a means of surveillance. In the CKCK newsroom of days past, reporters would often spend hours on the telephone arranging interviews or obtaining permission to record pictures in places not open to the general public. Journalists would then negotiate with the assignment desk for the resources needed to collect their story elements. CTV Regina’s video-journalists, outfitted with cellphones and with vans that carry all necessary recording equipment, are able to organize their story elements literally on the move. However, journalists working in the field can also be directly monitored and managed, wherever they may be, through the simple act of making a telephone call. Less obviously, since the company owns the cellphones and pays for the service, it receives records of all calls made by reporters. Such records are a map of how each video-journalist

conducts his or her work life. Journalists are encouraged through this record of activity to self-monitor their use of time and company resources.

Potentially, a manager wishing to control the journalistic process has a clear and instant line of influence to each journalist, a constant channel of persuasion or coercion as close as the nearest cellular telephone. Video-journalists, working independently (or in isolation, depending on your point of view), have no recourse but to deal exclusively with the newsroom manager for direction on the form that their reporting should take. This is a recipe for consolidating the gatekeeping process in the hands of management and, by extension, asserting full control over the news of the day. The gatekeeping function is no longer “proportional to the amount of power and responsibility the individual [journalist] has written into his or her job description” (Schulman, 1990, p. 116). In this scenario it is written out of the job description altogether.

In practice, however, the news director at CTV Regina keeps a relatively low profile. Video-journalists are normally responsible for choosing the stories that will be covered each day. The news director simply does not have the time to keep a constant watch on the comings and goings of the news gathering team and, in general, the news director’s editorial input and influence is manifested in a spirit of guidance rather than compliance. There is a sense that the company has adopted a human relations model for newsroom management where, at least on the surface, “supportive leader communication positively affects productivity and morale” (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993, p. 78). However, it is equally clear that, should the need arise, the news director has the technological means, the structural opportunity, and the power to drastically alter or even kill news reports that are deemed to be unacceptable. The potential for surveillance by management, together with the acknowledged (if unspoken) power to intervene in the news production process, has established a working environment where video-journalists understand the limits of expression very clearly. They are free to work within certain boundaries.

This system of incentives and boundaries works particularly well in an organization that has witnessed a drastic reduction in its workforce. The former CKCK news gathering process distributed responsibility for journalistic and creative decisions among editors, technicians, and reporters. By eliminating editors, photographers, and associated production people, the basic process of gathering information, making sense of it, and putting it into a digestible form has become immeasurably more arduous. Increased independence and mobility in the field comes at a cost, because the daily appetite for content remains. Video-journalists must therefore devise their own skill sets and seek personal efficiencies in order to fulfill their daily obligations. The pressure is constantly on to create an efficient formula for news production. Individuals responsible for performing many complex tasks under the constant pressure of looming deadlines are more inclined to take a path of least resistance rather than explore options that are likely to make their lives more complicated.

The question of news quality

This raises the notoriously slippery question of quality. In a variation on Taras' theme of "deadly conformity" it is comparatively easy to make the case that a newsroom with fewer people engaging the journalistic process will, by its very nature, produce news stories that are less meaningful. News reports created by video-journalists—operating without the benefit of interaction with photojournalists, videotape editors, or an assignment editor—are the product of one voice, one point of view, rather than several. The dynamic tension and resulting richness of meaning that grows out of discussions about gathered information, suspicions, credibility of sources, video possibilities, editing solutions, and overall benefit to the community is inevitably truncated. Add to this the systemic pressure to produce formulaic and uncomplicated news reports, and it becomes unlikely that complex stories requiring sensitivity and nuance will be pursued with any degree of alacrity. To paraphrase Schulman, the safe and mundane is mostly favoured over the risky and experimental (Schulman, 1990, p. 119).

This is not to say that the video-journalists at CTV Regina operate in complete isolation. However, concerns about the limitations on work are more likely to be blamed on logistical difficulties rather than problems with corporate structure or ideology. This is largely because the process of learning the technical limitations of video-journalism is still happening at CTV Regina, and the limited time available for video-journalists to talk among themselves is usually devoted to strategies for overcoming problems in the field. (These might include matters as conceptually simple but technically perplexing as working out how to frame and record one's own image.) In other words, the dominant topics of discussion are concerned with what it takes to get the job done.

The greatest concern with respect to quality, however, is reserved for matters pertaining to core values and the role of journalists in society. The success of CKCK Television News was predicated on the trust that the Regina community conferred upon a service that promised an exacting standard of vigilance with regard to the public good. In this respect, and perhaps somewhat naïvely, the CKCK Television newsroom reflected and extended into a modern popular form the kinds of values that Habermas attributed to the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century. Before reporting on them, journalists at CKCK were expected to rationally and critically discuss among themselves matters of public concern. More than this, their role was to dig out questionable or improper behaviour among individuals employed by the public purse, ensure that the system did not bend the rules for people of power and influence, and generally act as agents of transparency for the social and political life of the community. Such vigilance and investigation took time and often yielded nothing that could be responsibly put before the viewing public. However, the very act of journalistic vigilance helped to keep everybody honest. Of course, these rituals of journalistic process also fulfilled a larger objective: to "give the public the means of forming an opinion" (Habermas, 1991, p. 66). As Nicholas Garnham has pointed out, this has become

“a commonplace” in any discussion about the right of citizens to access information in a democratic society (Garnham, 1990, pp. 104-105).

Under the organizational structure of CTV Regina, the ability to perform this critical function has been called into question. Given the limitations of the work environment, there are severe disincentives attached to committing a journalist for days, or possibly weeks, in pursuit of an investigative story. Matters of vigilance pertaining to the inner workings of city hall, the police service, or the legislature also receive short shrift. Whereas reporters at CKCK Television News were normally assigned to specific beats (such as city hall or the legislature) in order to develop the necessary contacts and expertise to deal effectively with complex procedural issues, today’s video-journalists normally act “at large,” showing up at orchestrated events to collect and transmit, with varying degrees of critical insight, information that is presented to them by self-interested parties.

The new reality in TV news

In the view of CKCK’s former news director, Frank Flegel, the video-journalists at CTV Regina are faced with challenges that cut to the heart of their ability to effectively report on even the routine and mundane stories of the day:

A reporter should be thinking about the story, how to interpret and give meaning to the story. You can’t do that when you’re also thinking about the camera . . . Photographers are journalists, but they are specialists who look at the best way to shoot a story, to add understanding to the story. A reporter in my opinion cannot properly do both. The result is a drop in the quality of production and a drop in the quality of reporting. [personal communication, January 6, 2004]

The temptation, more than ever, is to settle for the workable sound bite, the useable quote, then move on as quickly as possible to gather the remaining elements—illustrative pictures, cutaway shots, stand-ups, and reaction quotes—in order to make the assigned deadline. It is a trend that troubles Flegel, part of a move toward greater superficiality and greater manipulation of the audience. It is further reflected in the programming decision to “lead local,” to reserve the position of first story in each newscast for a local report regardless of what is happening elsewhere. It is an empty pandering, in Flegel’s opinion, to the rituals of community identification at the expense of solid journalistic judgment:

I once watched a newscast lead with a story about some woman with a bunch of cats when soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan were being killed, [President] Bush was angry at countries that wouldn’t support him, SARS was rampant in Ontario and Mad Cow was devastating the West! [personal communication, January 6, 2004]

Yet for senior reporter Wayne Mantyka, these are the new realities of work life in the CTV Regina news operation. Reporters help each other as best they can. Sacrifices are made. If people desire other opinions about what is happening in their community “they can go to the CBC, or Global Television, or the newspaper, there are lots of options.” As for CTV news: “We only think about pleasing the audience. We give the people what they want.” [personal communication,

December 12, 2003] And it would appear that “the people” agree. The latest ratings for the six o’clock news program indicate that audience numbers are increasing. They are now slightly higher than the historic averages recorded in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁰

This is welcome news for the journalists who work in the CTV Regina news operation. It means that their jobs are reasonably safe for the time being. Most, like Wayne Mantyka, are quite comfortable with the profit-to-employment equation. Most are enthusiastic about using technology that gives them the latitude to operate with substantial day-to-day freedom and creative control. A majority have never worked any other way. The journalists at CKCK would tell you that they are coming up with solutions to some of the problems presented by video-journalism. They would be mostly unconcerned with the theoretical ramifications of control issues or the meaning of convergence and concentration of ownership in the Canadian media. All are happy to be employed.

Yet there is a sense that something has slipped, that investigations such as the one involving Bosco Homes are a thing of the past. Thoughts turn again to matters of ownership and distance, the suspicion that the people who run Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE) see no advantage in being accessible to the community in the way that members of the Hill family were. Such distancing has permitted a strict bottom-line regime to be imposed on the craft of gathering and disseminating local television news in Regina. And while the new organizational model for the CTV Regina newsroom might *appear* to offer its video-journalists more independence in their daily work lives, that independence is strictly limited by the requirement to produce news reports for a system that favours the easy fix over endeavours that require patience, perseverance, and, above all, time. CTV Regina’s viewers may have rewarded the news operation with higher audience numbers, but they have done so on the basis of appearances: the calculated move to retain the appearance of a journalistic organization with deep roots in the community while cutting the very heart and soul out of the organization that planted those roots in the first place. In this respect, the viewing public in Regina cannot be served except in the shallowest manner.

A front-page report, published in the *Financial Post* of January 10, 2004, revealed that Bell Canada Enterprises is considering selling off Bell Globemedia. The bottom line, literally so, is that the marriage of the *Globe and Mail*, CTV, and Bell’s own Internet services has not been as profitable as expected. Concentration of ownership and convergence of technologies have failed to produce the intended business results. The report goes on to speculate that BCE will look for ways to cut costs in its media holdings in order to make them more attractive to potential buyers (Shecter, 2004). How this will affect CTV Regina and its employees is impossible to gauge at this time; however, past experience indicates that, under new ownership, fewer rather than more resources are likely to be allocated to news operations across the system.

Notes

1. The author was the assignment editor, and later the news producer, at CKCK Television in Regina, Saskatchewan, from 1985 to 1989.
2. Sales of privately held assets are often kept confidential between the parties involved. However, the sale price of the Sifton holdings and, subsequently, the Harvard holdings was generally known at the time. My information comes from Frank Flegel, the former news director at CKCK and a member of the management team during both sales.
3. My thanks to Tom Fong, CKCK's former film lab technician and the station's informal historian, for keeping the staff lists from this period.
4. Harvard Developments was listed in 1985 as holding 2.5% of the private television station market in Canada. At the time, this was on par with companies such as Baton Broadcasting and CanWest Communications, which would later become Global Television. See Lorimer & McNulty (1992), p. 211.
5. The audience numbers were made available to employees. I have confirmed the ratings from the 1980s with former news director Frank Flegel.
6. The staff numbers are posted in the newsroom at CTV Regina. They were confirmed by news director Carl Worth in a personal communication, January 7, 2004.
7. CKCK Television was not the only media organization undergoing dramatic cuts at this time. Both CBC Television and the Regina *LeaderPost* newspaper reduced employee numbers by similar amounts.
8. The Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan has retained CKCK Television program lineups and scripts from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.
9. The reference to Global has to do with the entry of CanWest Global's STV into the Regina television market. The market was fragmented further throughout the 1990s by specialty channel offerings on cable and direct-to-home access to satellite-delivered programming.
10. Nielsen ratings for the Regina extended market, released January 2004, show the two years and older audience figures for the time period 6:00 to 7:00 p.m., Monday to Friday, at an average of slightly more than 80,000 viewers.

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