'PEOPLE-EVENT' BIAS, INEPTIA, DELAYED POLLUTION STORY

BY TED FAIRHURST

This past Summer, a young mother on welfare who lived near the Canada Metal Company was ordered by the City Health Department to keep her house as free as possible of dust to protect her children from lead poisoning. The woman considered the order ridiculous and said she would have to dust almost every half hour to keep ahead of the dust blowing in her windows.

The owner of the property was told to replace the topsoil in the backyard, because the Board of Health considered it a health hazard. The absentee landlord complained of being "picked on", because no other owners had been ordered to replace their soil and after all, he wasn't responsible for the lead contamination.

Not big stories, I admit. But they did provide human interest to help frustrated editors cope with the Summer doldrums. The fact is that neither of these stories were touched by any of Toronto's mass circulation dailies or by the electronic newsmedia. (One exception is CBL, because it covered the soil removal story).

At first glance, it looks like that recurring journalistic attitude: boredom. Tear-jerking features about welfare recipients whose problems are suddenly worsened by industrial lead pollution may have excited audiences several months ago, but as in the case of moon-walks, they soon lose their sensationalism, and working journalists project their own boredom onto the public.

But the ignoring of these stories signifies more than the newsmedia's inclination for tiring of certain stories in spite of the public issues involved. It typifies the serious lack of initiative with which the dominant newsmedia have treated the lead story from the start.

Lead contamination near the Canada Metal Company was made a public issue by the Toronto Citizen in September '73. The initial story, describing research conducted by the University of Toronto, was given to the community newspaper by a doctor whose disenchantment with the official public health agencies was matched by a lack of faith in the dominant newsmedia.

The Citizen article generated a chain reaction of lead stories, and some hastily-arranged blood testing by the city health authorities. The first crisis came in October, when a count of over 90 micrograms in an infant was high enough to shock officials into an ill-conceived attempt to shut down the Canada Metal Company. In short, the Citizen article made industrial lead pollution one of the major issues at the Toronto Board of Health—a issue which subsequently encompassed many other sources of lead such as paints, gasolines, and certain brands of electric kettles.
This entire process could have begun at least a full year earlier, had the Toronto newsmedia reacted seriously to indications of lead pollution. As early as December 1969, the provincial government was investigating contamination at the Canada Metal Company. But for almost four years, the newsmedia remained unaware of the evidence. Their stories dealt only with contamination at a battery re-cycling company called Toronto Refiners and Smelters.

The Toronto Refiners health hazard had been made a public issue by area residents, aided by the Environmental Law Association and their reform alderman, Dan Heap. From early 1972, lead near Toronto Refiners was a continuing subject at the Board of Health. Throughout the Summer and Fall of that year, the city and province conducted several blood tests, most of the results of which became public. The issue reached a climax in June '73, when lawyers from the company and the Environmental Law Association turned one Board of Health meeting into a quasi-judicial hearing for a marathon 13 hours.

The issue provided raw material for thousands of lines of copy, most of them generated by either the rhetoric at the Health Board or the personal experiences of families who suffered from the contamination. But what the newsmedia failed to do was make public other sources of lead contamination as yet uncovered by politicians, environmentalists, or citizen activists.

Perhaps the failure was inevitable, given that most of the lead stories were handled by municipal affairs reporters, more accustomed to zoning applications and street widenings than dustfall readings and blood-lead counts. But surely the newsmedia should not be excused for such lack of initiative merely because the wrong reporters were assigned to the story.

While the Board of Health was grappling with lead pollution at Toronto Refiners and Smelters, engineers from the Environment Ministry were quietly documenting even more serious contamination at a smelter just a few miles to the east. Why didn't the Queen's Park press gallery report on these bureaucratic activities? What prevented City Hall reporters from uncovering other sources of lead contamination, once the Toronto Refiners case had become known?

In the Yellow Pages, the Canada Metal Company tops the list under the heading "Lead" and appears under two other categories dealing with the lead industry. This means that even a most superficial examination of the Toronto lead industry would have introduced any inquiring reporter to a second major source of pollution.

The newsmedia's lackadaisical attitude to lead pollution was best illustrated by a report in the Toronto Star on August 26, 1972. Datelined Montreal, it briefly outlined the results
of research by Professor Harry Warren of the University of British Columbia. Dr. Warren discovered dangerous amounts of contamination in two Toronto industrial districts, one of them in the east end. The professor refused to identify the companies, but said he had submitted his findings to the city health authorities. Unfortunately, no follow-up appeared to tell the public where Dr. Warren had found high lead readings or what, if anything, the health officials planned to do about it. The Warren study appeared in the newspaper one full year before the Toronto Citizen reported that U. of T. researchers studying Canada Metals had confirmed Dr. Warren's findings.

In summary, the story of lead pollution at the Canada Metal Company was submerged in government and corporate bureaucracies for almost four years, without becoming known to the public. It became a political issue only after a medical source planted the story in a community newspaper to pressure the government into making the company clean up faster. Had the medical source's strategy not called for the use of the newsmedia, the existence of lead contamination at the Canada Metal Company may very well never have become known to the public and local politicians.

The central question for journalists is why such a situation can persist for so long without becoming known to the newsmedia and what can be done to correct this deficiency.

The near-missing of the Canada Metals story was due mainly to what I call the "people-event" bias of the newsmedia. According to the conventional wisdom of contemporary journalism, human beings and the events they get caught up in make the most marketable copy. Many mass circulation dailies, for example, make the individual or a family the centre of the news story especially when dealing with such intangible subjects as economics (inflation), urban planning (citizen participation), and ecology (industrial pollution). And reporters on political beats place a heavy emphasis on both official events such as sittings of the Legislature, local council and committee meetings, and conventions, and on pseudo-events such as demonstrations, news conferences, and public speeches.

In the electronic media, the "people-event" bias is even more pronounced and thus more powerful. In striving to capture the picture of a story, television reporters concentrate on the actions of the people as they're performing in events. Their assignment editors favour subjects that lend themselves to being depicted with interest on the coloured screen. For radio reporters, it's the sound of a story that counts; and that means being on the scene when an event is breaking, to record as many voices as possible. Stories are generally judged according to the degree of emotion expressed
in the "actuality clip". And the rhetorical speeches of politicians at public meetings are much preferred over quieter comments obtained through private interviews. Such is the imperative of the "people-event" bias as it impinges upon the electronic newsmedia.

Prior to September 1973, the Canada Metals lead story lay beyond the restrictive people-event bias of the newsmedia and therefore, regardless of its intrinsic worth, was not the kind of story reporters were likely to pursue. Until the publication of the Citizen article, lead contamination near Canada Metals was a problem only the faceless bureaucrats knew about. They were dealing with it the way they, as experts, saw fit and that precluded any involvement of the newsmedia or public in their decision-making. Such a private handling of a problem quite understandably could not generate the kind of people-oriented events that feed the bias of the newsmedia.

One solution to this deficiency is of course for the newsmedia to emancipate themselves from their restrictive bias by paying much greater attention to situations that may contain important public issues, even though the situations per se aren't generating people-oriented events. In the case of the lead story, it ought to have been standard procedure for the newsmedia to have conducted a thorough investigation of all Toronto lead companies the moment contamination at one of them became known. Even a simple visit to the Canada Metal Company (the Yellow Pages would have provided the address) would have left reporters with an immediate impression of the age of the company, its numerous smokestacks, and their proximity to a large working class neighbourhood. Interviews with some residents likely would have revealed that the company's emissions were being monitored.

But more is required than simply reminding journalists of their responsibility to look behind the events they encounter. More importantly, the Toronto newsmedia must become much more involved in the activities of government and institutional bureaucracies. At Queen's Park, for instance, it is not good enough for reporters simply to be scurrying through the corridors of the Legislature, getting the politicians to comment on their latest press releases, while engineers with the Environment Ministry on Bay street are secretly documenting the health hazards of lead companies. The Queen's Park press gallery must get into much closer contact with the giant bureaucracy that operates the provincial government. Had the reports of the Environment Ministry experts been delivered to the press lounge along with the dozens of news releases that are distributed each week, the lead problem at Canada Metals would have become a public issue much sooner than it did. The problem is however that such sensitive reports are never made readily available to the newsmedia. They must be squeezed out
of the bureaucrats by journalists whose primary purpose is the uncovering of new issues rather than the writing of formula articles on people-oriented events. In the Canada Metals case, the newsmedia must shamefully acknowledge that the Environment Ministry papers which outlined the degree of contamination were obtained by a community organizer, who in turn made them available to CBL News and the Globe and Mail.

I cannot over-emphasize the need for journalists to pay closer attention to the bureaucracies of government. What disturbed me most of all during the lead story was the newsmedia's poor knowledge of the personnel and inner-workings of two very powerful provincial Ministries--Health and Environment. For example, it remained unknown for several months that one of the high officials in the Health Ministry was a former medical consultant to a giant American chemical corporation and was considered by some environmental health experts to represent the viewpoint of industry. The connection was first made public by Max Allen, a story editor with CBC Radio's As It Happens.

It was also not known that as early as the Summer of 1972, a medical consultant from the Health Ministry had advised the City Medical Officer of Health to conduct a blood-testing program in the Canada Metals neighbourhood. His clandestine communications were publicized only after provincial bureaucrats were called upon to justify the private way in which they had handled the problem for over three years.

The role of scrutinizing watch-dog becomes even more important when we recognize the special nature of the bureaucracies such as Health and Environment. These two Ministries exemplify that form of organization John Kenneth Galbraith calls the Technostructure. Their key personnel are specialists who command the expertise that is crucial to the operation and maintenance of a technological society, and who thereby function as custodians of the technique and hardware required to transform the aims of legislation into what is scientifically feasible. And so the goals of clean air and soil are administered through such measures as abatement programs, control orders, ambient air criteria, impingement standards, and bag house filters.

Because they are relied upon to provide expertise in a technological milieu, the specialists exercise immense influence over the way governments respond to problems. And as Galbraith points out, the Technostructure has a vested interest in seeing that problems are approached in accordance with its own world-view--a world-view intended to perpetuate the need for and expand the role of the Technostructure.

In the case of lead, the engineers of the Environment Ministry operated on the assumption that lead contamination
"PEOPLE-EVENT' BIAS cont.

was eminently a technical problem that could be resolved by
government engineers co-operating with their corporate counter-
barts to devise the most efficient pollution-control methods,
and to minimize their adverse effect on the financial health
of the industry. And so, I was hardly surprised when one top
official in the then Air Management Branch told me that his
people take polluters to court only as a last resort, after
all avenues of co-operation, moral suasion, and coercion have
been exhausted. When it comes to recalcitrant corporations,
the Ministry considers even very slow progress a more effi-
cient way of cleaning up the environment than lengthy and
expensive court proceedings. In other words, it is the
world-view of engineers that technical problems demand tech-
nical solutions, and scientists are much more qualified
trouble-shooters than lay people in the fields of law, polit-
tics, or journalism.

It is clear to me that such a credo and the values it
presupposes ought to be challenged publicly so that people
can get a precise understanding of the role and power of the
Technostructures, both in government and the corporate world.
But this will never be done as long as the newsmedia are so
cought up in people-oriented events that they remain oblivious
to the activities of the technocrats.

My criticism of the handling of the lead story does not
apply to the investigation of the industrial lead hazard by
Max Allen of As It Happens. By interviewing environmental
health experts in several American cities, he added new argu-
ments to the public debate which emerged in Toronto. In
Dying of Lead, Mr. Allen challenged the views of the lead
industry experts; and suggested that medical evidence can be
purchased to serve corporate interests. Such a suggestion was
so myth-shattering that the lead industry considered the
documentary worth 'of an Injunction. In brief, Max Allen's
work was based not on the reporting of people-oriented events
but on the publicizing of new facts which helped determine
the course of events. His programs were listened to by members
of the Toronto Board of Health, and subsequently played at a
City Council meeting to convey to the politicians the complex-
ity and importance of the lead problem.

NEWS NOTE

Media Probe will join with other organizations in con-
vening the Media '75 Conference on Mass Media to be held
in Toronto in May. Further information in our next issue
(March).