Who Controls Canada’s Media?

Annual Conference of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, Montréal, Québec, February 13 to 15, 2003

Samantha Thrift
McGill University

Abstract: The McGill Institute for the Study of Canada held its eighth annual conference on public policy issues February 13–15, 2003. The theme of the conference was “Who Controls Canada’s Media?” Panellists included executives from both private and public communication corporations, academics/scholars, and journalists and editors from both print and TV. Discussions centred on media convergence, the concentration of media ownership, issues of content, and the threat of increasing fragmentation. Speakers related how the “need for speed” and pressure to “go live” were changing news reporting. They debated whether media owners should exert commercial and/or ideological influence over content. Other topics included the role of the CBC, the Internet and regulation, and the place of the media in contemporary social and political life.


Keywords: Broadcasting (public/private); Cultural industries policy; Mass media effects; New media; Ownership (concentration/competition)

From February 13 to 15, 2003, the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada (MISC) held its eighth annual conference on public policy issues. The guiding
question of this year’s program was “Who Controls Canada’s Media?” According to MISC director Antonia Maioni, the intent of the conference was “to contribute to agenda-setting on the future of the media in Canada, and to engage citizens to better influence public policy on these issues.” The bilingual conference brought together more than 50 panellists, each of whom presented a unique perspective on issues relating to media policy, practice, and theory. Speakers included executives within private and public communication corporations, such as Robin Rabinovitch (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), Robert Prichard (Torstar Corporation), and Phyllis Yaffe (Broadcast Group, Alliance Atlantis); newspaper and magazine editors, such as Alain Dubuc (Le Soleil), Edward Greenspon (The Globe and Mail), and Anthony Wilson-Smith (Maclean’s); print and television journalists, editors, and columnists, including Peter Mansbridge (CBC), Mirielle Silcoff (Saturday Post, The National Post), and Michel C. Auger (Le Journal de Montréal); and former journalists, notably Michel Roy (chair, Quebec Press Council) and Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada. Over the two full days of the conference, a sell-out audience heard (and, in some cases, contributed to) lively discussions of media convergence, the concentration of media ownership, issues of content, and the threat of increasing fragmentation.

The conference opened with an address by the Governor General, who spoke of the information media’s responsibility to accurately represent Canadian society in all its diversity and dynamism. Drawing on her personal experience, Clarkson argued that the media is a critical resource for new immigrants, who “need information . . . about how they can truly participate and become Canadian.” Directly addressing members of the information media, she appealed for standards of excellence in journalism for the benefit of new Canadians, stating that “[i]t is they to whom you . . . must be responsible, if you truly believe in freedom of thought. They are the people who are your audience and they are the people whom you must affect. And this is where the freedom should be operating. This is where that freedom can give keys to worlds for other people.” Conference organizers were pleased that the Governor General’s opening talk offered a substantial contribution to the debate and was not merely the ceremonial kickoff typical of such events. (The Governor General’s speech is available on-line at http://www.misc-iecm.mcgill.ca/media/clarkson.pdf.)

After much discussion, the conference was organized into seven plenary sessions, so that all in attendance would be present at every event, rather than smaller breakout sessions. This guaranteed a continuity of issues from one session to another and prevented the kind of drifting between sessions that is a common source of disruption at such events. Each of the seven panels will be briefly discussed here.

The proprietors: Do too few control too much?
The speakers on the day’s first panel were split over the issue of convergence. Some claimed that it was an ongoing success. Others argued forcefully that convergence between media had failed as a business issue and that the emerging
issues were those having to do with the phenomena awkwardly referred to as “de-convergence.” Suggesting that “[t]he convergence bubble has already burst,” André Préfontaine, president of Médias Transcontinental Inc., cited instances in which corporations facing severe financial difficulties are selling off assets. Specifically, he noted CanWest’s selling of smaller-market newspapers, Quebecor’s potential loss of the TVA network, and Bell Globe Media’s divestiture of CTV and The Globe and Mail. Ken Goldstein, president of Communications Management Inc., countered this view, articulating a pro-convergence perspective according to which market forces compensate for potential corporate excesses. Offering an unlikely set of rhetorical allies, Goldstein based his argument for the continued success of the convergence model by drawing on the ideas of Harold Innis and his own teenage children. The market economy, not the government, control the media, by dictating content, because increased choice (through specialty channels, in particular) has given audiences greater opportunities to search out niche programming. Increasing fragmentation results in declining advertising revenues, which, in turn, lower production costs and the quality of programming content. Companies, then, “re-aggregate fragments to restore economies of scale.”

Robert Prichard (president of Torstar Communication) echoed these sentiments and took a stand against government intervention in the media. He stated that “newspapers are a private trust carried out by private means” and “[c]ontrol of media must lie with readers.” Moreover, he argued, media institutions should be thought of as companies; that is, as entities concerned with shareholder value. The focus on shareholder value, Prichard remarked, is not undemocratic, if one acknowledges that the financial success of a media outlet will increase when that outlet better services and reflects the interests of the community in which it is based. Addressing the issue of content quality in journalism, Prichard advocated an honour system of sorts, noting that “you can’t legislate or mandate quality. It is a culture built on trust.” As an example, he added that The Toronto Star publishes its mandate and that readers ensure its maintenance. However, panel expert Arnold Amber, president of Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, doubted the logic of pro-convergence arguments. Pointing to the budget cuts and increasing generalization of expertise that accompany convergence, Amber commented, “Convergence is never done to make better journalism.”

Have the journalists lost control?
This session began with two speakers who addressed whether the “need for speed” in broadcast journalism affects its quality and depth. CBC journalist Roger Smith spoke first and argued that speed is both the strength and Achilles heel of television journalism. While the news captures the unfolding story for the viewer, the quality of the story suffers from the journalists’ lack of time to adequately prepare a comprehensive—even a knowledgeable—report. Drawing from personal experience, he remarked that a reporter requires a certain amount of time to prepare, for example, a report on a complex Supreme Court of Canada decision. The massive pressure to “go live” when covering a story, however, reduces preparation time and diminishes the quality of reporting. This pressure to “go live” is rooted in
technological possibility and internetwork competition, rather than in any journalistic necessity. Paul Larocque, host of *En direct* on TVA, made a similar point, noting that technological developments have had a dramatic impact on journalistic styles. He observed that the number of hours it had once taken to transfer film to video gave journalists in the past a window of opportunity in which to prepare their reports. Now, digital technology has eliminated that window, making “getting pictures” instantaneous. Since pictures require talk, journalists have accommodated this shift in speed by producing journalism that might best be characterized as instinctual, rather than reflective.

The second issue taken up by this panel was even more contentious: the question of whether media owners should exert commercial and/or ideological influence over content. The clash of perspectives between Gordon Fisher (CanWest news and information president) and Russell Mills (former *Ottawa Citizen* publisher and Neiman Fellow at Harvard University) was the main event here. Fisher argued in favour of owner involvement, stating that “owners have every right to direct their operations in terms of both content and ideology.” He questioned the notion that owners should remain “silent and uninvolved” figures when dealing with media content issues and noted that, in his experience, owners have always tried to influence content. Moreover, he stated that an owner’s influence could be extended only so far, given the physical constraints that impede direct influence.

Russell Mills put forward the opposite position. Owners should never use the media to assert their commercial or ideological interests, he argued. He warned of the severe bias that would result from owner intervention, stressing that “facts should never be selected based on owners’ opinions” and “truth can only be pursued successfully in a climate free from pressure.” As an example, Mills cited the provocative speech given by CanWest founder Israel Asper in late 2002, in which he claimed that the media had a distinctly anti-Israel bias. Mills argued that the editors of Asper’s newspapers could easily construe his remarks as dictating content in a none too subtle fashion.

**What are the limits of government control?**

Amidst much talk of the irrelevance or impossibility of regulation, the next panel brought together individuals with clear stakes in the debate over government control of media. Clifford Lincoln, chair of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, which has held hearings on Canadian broadcasting for several months now, made the case for continued government oversight without revealing substantial conclusions of his committee’s impending report. Université de Montréal scholar Marc Raboy (who serves as a consultant for Lincoln’s committee) noted that the questions facing regulators in an age of media abundance were very different from those of several decades ago, when the problems were those of controlling access to limited media pipelines. Michael Hennessy, senior vice-president of Policy and Regulatory Affairs for the Canadian Cable Television Association, argued that the government’s ability to intervene was limited by the difficulty of managing or regulating consumer demand. If the government’s ability to manage the system is withering, Hennessy suggested, this “does not
mean only mass culture prevails, because fragmentation, [technology, and competition] are challenging that business case as well, but if content does not resonate with some target audience, it is simply not relevant no matter how desirable in theory. The only loyalty now is to what works for consumers. . . . There is simply too much choice, too many alternatives to manage consumption through regulation.”

**Special markets, special interests: Is the audience in control?**

If, as many media owners and executives claim, audiences direct media content, then the ongoing fragmentation of the marketplace is of vital interest. This final panel of the first day presented a diverse array of issues for the audience to consider, ranging from first-hand observations of the progressive “niche-ification” of culture to recommendations for media reorganization.

Phyllis Yaffe, CEO of Alliance Atlantis’ Broadcast Group, began by outlining the shift from conventional television to specialty TV channels, noting that 35% of television consumers already have digital technology. To speak of a “digital future,” then, obscures the extent to which digitization is a key feature of the present. Mirielle Silcoff was also concerned with the effects of fragmented culture, from her perspective as an arts writer in an increasingly compartmentalized media landscape. Silcoff wove personal experience throughout her speech, which traced the “niche-ification” of multiple general interest media, including the now defunct magazine *Saturday Night* and popular music culture. During the question period, Silcoff pointed to the fragmentation occurring in the music industry and the press that surrounds it. While that press is increasingly niche-oriented, devoted to highly specialized genres, the listening practices of contemporary youth embrace a range of genres and styles. This general interest is easily accommodated by downloading and sampling technologies, while the music press itself fails to acknowledge this breadth of tastes.

This point was not lost on the next speaker, Grant McCracken of McGill University. New technologies, exemplified by the Internet, have created a “participatory culture,” McCracken argued, in which the producers of media content are the consumers of media content. From an anthropological perspective, McCracken rephrased the conference question, suggesting that we should ask what controls the media, not who. In his estimation, the media need reorganizing, to reflect a greater emphasis on “structure” (i.e., all those things that move too slowly to count as “news”), instead of “event.” As an example, McCracken remarked that the news will report the “event” of a divorce statistic, but not the “structure,” or reasons for divorce, that precede the statistic. By focusing exclusively on the event, the media renders structure invisible. According to McCracken, “We need a media that reaches down into structure and tries to report it better.”

Writer and producer Wayne Grigsby concluded this session by stating that although television executives act as gatekeepers for the audience, it is the audience that controls media through their viewing choices. (He cited his own television series, *North of 60*, as evidence of the audience’s power to determine a program’s success.) For some, however, this allegedly utopian cornucopia of
choice produces more problems than pleasures. Yaffe, for instance, pointed out that fragmentation has simply provided more choices of the same (poor-quality) programming (see “reality television”). A reporter for the McGill Press, challenging Mirielle Silcoff’s claim that people under age 25 did not read newspapers, expressed frustration at the plethora of choice being thrust upon him, with so little guidance as to how to navigate those options. For him, The Globe and Mail offers a respite from the anxious, fragmented world, precisely because it represents a “general interest” community.

Who controls the future of public broadcasting?
This panel quickly became divided over the issue of what role the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation plays or should play within Canada’s contemporary media landscape. Andrew Coyne, columnist for The National Post, drew the most fire from other panellists, commenting that “[t]he bad news is that the CBC is increasingly obsolete; the good news is that it is increasingly unnecessary.” Using a pro-fragmentation line of argument, Coyne argued that today’s media offer a “dizzying array of choices . . . [of] all kinds of fascinating and risk-taking programming.” Therefore, the CBC is not the only network offering high-quality content and, as such, has no special role to fulfill in Canadian society. Coyne also cited the broadcaster’s declining ratings to buttress his point that “CBC can’t be all things to all people, but it [also] can’t be all things to no people.” Coyne advocated a change in approach, suggesting that the CBC use a pay-TV model that offers a constellation of channels from which viewers can select their favourites. Other panel members, including Robin Rabinovitch (president of CBC) and Paule Beaugrand-Champagne (president and CEO of Télé-Québec), opposed Coyne’s position, arguing that public broadcasters fulfill a unique cultural role that overshadows the importance of ratings and profits. Peter Humphreys, from the University of Manchester, set forth arguments both for and against public broadcasters, but ultimately concluded with a defence of the service. Among other benefits, public broadcasters provide a counterweight to commercialism and potential media concentration in the private sector as well as establish standards of quality for the system as a whole. Beaugrand-Champagne concurred, stating that Télé-Québec has been an “indispensable instrument for educational and cultural development.”

The most forceful remarks on this panel were those of Noreen Golfman, of Memorial University and the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting. Golfman went after both Coyne and the CBC, the former for underestimating the role of the public broadcaster, the latter for its cozy relationship with the present Liberal government. She called explicitly for the prime minister to give up his ability to appoint the CBC’s board of directors. In his remarks, Robert Rabinovitch made it clear that the CBC had a continuing role within the Canadian television system: “The privates will never pick up the flag: it’s simply too expensive to abandon simultaneous substitutions [of popular U.S. shows] for Canadian content.” Moreover, the presence of the CBC guarantees that the Canadian voice will not be stifled. Rabinovitch recalled that the “friendly fire” incident in Afghanistan, which
killed four Canadian soldiers, was reported by CNN only on its “crawler” (headlines running across the bottom of the screen), making the point that the CBC “tells Canadian stories that reflect our culture, and these stories will not be made if we are not there.” During the question period, audience members broke away from the all-or-none debate articulated by panellists’ positions. Tanya Churchman (a reporter for Global News) made the poorly received suggestion that the CBC uses excessive resources when covering stories, suggesting that this represented a mis-allocation of resources and a missed opportunity to save money.

**Technology: Will everyone be in control?**

How have changing technologies changed the rules for Canada’s media? This panel addressed that question from various perspectives. Candis Callison, a doctoral candidate from the Comparative Media Studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, noted that a dominant trend in media research emphasizes the creative activity of media audiences, who choose and interpret media messages in ways that might be considered empowering.

Sunny Handa, a lawyer and teacher specializing in new media, drew attention to the difficulties confronting those who seek to regulate Internet-based media. Handa asked participants to decide whether material placed on a Web site constituted a broadcast or whether an on-line newspaper had the same legal status as a paper newspaper. Could the CRTC, when it meets in 2004, decide to legally mandate Canadian content on the Internet?

Raja Khanna, president and CEO of SNAP Media Corporation, offered a forceful critique of the poor quality of most Internet content. Khanna, who designs on-line communities for young people, expressed grave concerns about the ability of children and teenagers to distinguish advertising from factual or informative content. On the one hand, contemporary youth are not equipped with the discriminatory tools necessary for critical assessment of their favourite Web sites; on the other, the division between advertising and information is being progressively blurred. Khanna illustrated this point with discussion of a Web site, “Cool 2B Real,” aimed at creating an on-line community where young girls can feel confident about who they are, mentally and physically. America’s Beef Producers sponsors the site, which features a “Statement of Principles Regarding Nutrition and Health” that stresses the importance of beef in a healthy diet. Khanna commented that “[t]he lines between fact and fiction, advertising and propaganda—for youth nowadays, they can’t tell the difference, and that’s scary. They’re putting their trust in content where there’s no authenticity. . . . They [youth] are in charge. The problem is what they are in control of.”

The final panellist of the session, Ian MacLean (vice-president, Media Experts iTV Lab), argued that advertisers will need to change their strategies in light of new technologies. In contrast to Khanna’s position, MacLean argued that audiences are savvy, able to detect “subtle” advertising tactics such as product placement, and that they crave intelligent advertising. Advertisers will need to develop enjoyable, more complex commercials, like the “mini-movies” produced on-line by BMW to sell their cars. Bruno Guglielminetti, of Radio-Canada, spoke
at length of the risks and advantages of building Internet-based content around Canada’s main public radio broadcasting system.

**Do the media have undue influence on civic life?**

Although it lacked some of the fireworks of other panels, this session offered some of the most interesting and reasoned commentary on the place of media in contemporary social and political life. Elisabeth Gidengil, a McGill political scientist who studies voting behaviour, made it clear that voting among young people has declined significantly in recent years, just as the consumption of newspapers and other news media by this population segment has diminished noticeably. Other panellists took up the question of political influence on the media, and both the means and the extent to which politicians seek to influence coverage. Edward Greenspon, editor of *The Globe and Mail*, suggested that evidence of such practice was rare (and almost never direct) and that, in his own experience, the owners of *The Globe and Mail* were content to leave editorial decisions and positions taken to the newspaper’s professional staff. Alex Jones noted that the relationship of journalists to politicians had changed enormously over the course of his career, most noticeably in the post-Watergate area, as few aspects of a politician’s life and career were now considered off the record. Cabinet Minister Alan Rock, in remarks that many found engaging (and that led the chair to ask Rock to reconsider his decision not to seek the Liberal party leadership), talked about the daily cycle of news deadlines and press conferences, and the ways in which his own activities had adapted to this schedule.

**Conclusions: What have we learned?**

The final panel asked leaders in particular fields to quickly summarize what they might have learned from the conference. Alain Dubuc, president and publisher of *Le Soleil* newspaper, suggested that the issues remained predictable and sticky, and that he had not learned a great deal. Donna Logan, of the University of British Columbia’s School of Journalism, spoke strongly of the need to protect journalistic integrity in the face of those forces that seemed to threaten it. Chris Dornan, director of the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University, pointed to ominous developments that continue to threaten the status of the newspaper, most notably the erosion of its economic base through the Internet’s move into such fields as classified advertising.

Trina McQueen, the well-known broadcaster and media executive, focused on what, for many, had emerged as an unexpected and significant concern of the conference. She had learned, she said, that the principal issue facing Canadian society is fragmentation, and that this fragmentation goes beyond the development of niche advertising markets and specialty television channels. If fragmentation threatens the ability of people to find meaning in their lives, then the media must decide whether to further this fragmentation or seek ways in which to remedy it.

Two special events drew wide interest from the public and media, in part because they featured well-known and beloved media figures. One of the true
The highlights of the conference was the conversation held between long-time CBC anchorman Peter Mansbridge and Alex Jones, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University. Held a day prior to the international peace demonstration against war in Iraq, the discussion centred on the strategies used by the media in their coverage of the conflict. Mansbridge remarked that competitiveness between networks has led to sensational coverage, characterized by speed (“sound byte” journalism), numerous graphics, and conspicuous music. These strategies, he argued, alter people’s perceptions of reality. Hence, the “war” started with a presumption of inevitability: “‘Showdown Iraq,’ ‘Target Iraq’—right from the get-go, it was like there was no other option.” Jones noticed a perceptible change in how the American public has responded to networks’ highly patriotic coverage. Commenting on a discernable change in the character of American public debate, he argued that 9/11 marked the beginning of “a movement from the secular, where you can argue [with U.S. policy], to the sacred, where you can’t.”

A roundtable on the role of editorial cartoonists succeeded in producing an almost-full conference room on Saturday morning, the final day of the conference. Serge Chapleau of La Presse, Terry “Aislin” Mosher of the Montreal Gazette, Brian Gable of The Globe and Mail, and Susan Dewar of the Sun newspaper chain chose illuminating—often hilarious—examples for discussion and used personal anecdotes to present expert overviews of the state of cartooning in the contemporary newspaper world. Although most reported little interference from publishers in their choice of subject or tone, they pointed to a significant and distressing decline in the number of full-time cartoonists working in Canadian newspapers today.

As a final and perhaps optimistic note, the conference was extremely well attended. Students attended from universities across Canada, and virtually all of Canada’s main media organizations were represented.

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