THE COMMUNITY GROUPS AND THE MEDIA

IN THE OTTAWA-HULL AREA

Introduction to a Report prepared by
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In May, 1977 the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) published Who Calls The Tune? Using the Media to Promote Social Change in Canada, a study of the relationship between the media and community, citizen and self-help groups and organizations across Canada. The findings of this report suggested that inconsistent media coverage, misrepresentation of issues and concerns, limited access to the media and media resources and biased reporting were common problems for groups and organizations seeking effective coverage of community issues and the promotion of social change. The recommendations called for the establishment of a public broadcasting system that would guarantee access to local groups and organizations, more financial support for community media enterprises and a national information exchange medium.

This current study was proposed as a local analysis of the media and various groups and organizations in the Ottawa-Hull area. Three basic questions were to be explored:

1) Are there qualitative and quantitative differences in the coverage provided by the commercial media and the community media?

2) What are the differences in coverage among the various types of media - press, radio, and television?

3. Has there been misrepresentation of the views or activities of the groups and organizations involved?

The research for this report was to centre around local issues in the Ottawa-Hull area. There are important differences between the type of issues and groups in Ottawa and Hull. Briefs, lobbies and demonstrations can rarely be coordinated on both sides of "The River" since the concerns of community groups often apply to their respective provincial or municipal governments. Ottawa is primarily English speaking; Hull is primarily French speaking. The differences in population size and per capita income are substantial. Government jurisdiction, language, culture, urban density and other socio-economic factors are all determinants of the type of community group formed in each community. These distinctions have clearly been expressed in the formation of very different groups in Ottawa and Hull. While there are a great many citizen groups in this region, most of them, especially in Ottawa, represent the national offices or headquarters for member organizations and associations across Canada. Local issues are not a priority. The national capital aspect also determines media
policies. News coverage in Ottawa tends to be geared to "The Hill". Furthermore, the attraction of a large transient or temporary population to the civil service often means that people are either unaware of or unattached to the communities in which they live. Any examination of community groups and media in Ottawa-Hull must acknowledge these distinctions.

Media irresponsibility is perennially topical. While this subject sometimes incites angry debate among those who argue that the function of the media is to serve the common interest, it is more often met with a shake-of-head-and-shrug-of-the-shoulders attitude. Media irresponsibility is usually taken for granted. Community groups and citizen organizations, it is also assumed, are the ones who suffer most at the hands of the mass media. Our sympathies lie with small groups of dedicated volunteers continually struggling to inform and educate the public, change attitudes, or lobby for legislative changes and who, we assume, are unable to get media coverage because they are not wealthy, not established and not part of the corporate elite who so often influence the policies of the commercial media. Rarely, however, are we made aware of how community groups themselves feel about the media or how the media view their relationship with these organizations. The assumptions referred to above contain an element of truth. But neither the groups nor the media included in this study identified "political" factors as the central problem in community-media relations.

The original intention of the study was to examine media coverage of local issues by interviewing representatives from both the local media and several grass-roots, issue-oriented citizen groups. The results of some initial interviews re-directed the aim of the study from an analysis of existing relationships to a guide for improving relations.

Differences among the media are important however. It is obvious that the commercial press, radio and television are involved in a competitive market. By their very nature, the commercial media are profit-oriented. Making money means selling space or time to advertisers who want to reach the biggest market. To hold a large part of the market, the media must sell themselves to the public. In relation to community groups, this means that the media want stories which are of interest to and will attract the public - stories which are news-worthy. The most blatant manifestation of this is sensationalism. The community media, however, are less likely to treat citizen groups in this manner.

All of the groups interviewed in this study expressed an interest in a handbook or manual which would aid them in getting better media coverage within the existing community and commercial media network. To this end, Guidelines for Communication with the Media and a Directory of the Local Media have been included in the second (blue) and third (buff) sections of this report. It is hoped that these sections will be of practical value both to the community groups, whose objectives can only be reached through the mass media, and to the various newspapers and radio and television stations who, after all, have only to gain from a more media-conscious community.