ARROGANCE and IMPOTENCE

By Alan Baker

It wasn't until I engaged myself in a personal hassle with The Toronto Sun recently that I was forcibly reminded of two things - one, that "the public be damned" is an attitude that still prevails in some newspaper offices and that if you want to complain, the Ontario Press Council may sympathize, but often can't really go to bat for you. Perseverance and general bloody-mindedness are the techniques you really need to get some sort of intelligent response from the paper involved.

The incident seemed relatively unimportant. My eight-year-old daughter came home from school one day last November saying that her picture was going to be in the Sun the next day but she "hated it" and didn't want me to buy the paper. (I should say at this point that Naomi is a level-headed easy-going kid who's had her picture in the paper before and got a kick out of it). Puzzled, I naturally bought the Sun of November 9, 1977, to find a front-page head

Love is ... hard to explain for 8-year-olds

and an inside page feature (one of a series) by John Cosway with the slug: "Boys and girls in Grade 4 at Huron Street Public School were asked all about love and marriage".

The author teaches English and Media studies and is now working on a Ph.D at York University.
Five children were pictured, together with their comments.

I read Naomi's "interview" first - it seemed "cute" (Sunstyle) and I could see how she might have felt a bit embarrassed:

*I love Ewan Atto but I don't know if he loves me. He's in my class... People get married because they love each other. They stay married until they get a divorce. Sometimes they never get divorced.*

The others had similar comments. It seems that Ewan was "in love" with someone called Betsy.

Intrigued, I asked Naomi about the "interview". It turned out that she had felt somehow persuaded into talking about love of boyfriends and all that rather than about love for parents, something apparently she had expected to discuss. Apparently, the teacher was upset, and my wife (who thought the article was silly and inappropriate) said the mother of a boy in Naomi's class had mentioned her son's reluctance to tell about the incident.

My call to the classroom teacher at Huron, Ms. S. Harshman, turned my attention from the content of the story to something more significant - the question of journalistic ethics (or lack of them). The issue of evasion of responsibility on the part of the newspaper in failing to respond to my request for clarification arose later in the game.

The teacher, who said she didn't at all mind being quoted, told me that the Sun reporter had indicated he would like to interview the children about "what they liked and disliked". On this basis, she had allowed him to chat with a small group at the back of the room while she went on with the lesson. She had no idea that he was, in fact, quizzing them about love, marriage and divorce. Ms. Harshman told me she considered this "unethical" and that this was a case of "misrepresentation on the part of the Sun and exploitation of children to get them to talk on topics unsuitable for eight-year-olds".

Next, I spoke to Arthur Bussey, the school principal, who termed the article "a stab in the back". It seems Cosway had told him that the interviews with the children would be about "love and hate" in a general way. Bussey added: "Previous stories by the Sun on this school have been fair and accurate - this was disappointing - it was like a bad re-run of the old Art Linkletter Show". The principal appeared stoical and somewhat skeptical of getting results when I told him I was going to write to the Sun.

I didn't really expect a prompt reply to a rather longish, polite letter that I sent on November 13 to J.D. MacFarlane, Editorial Director of the Sun, pointing out that both I and the school staff were objecting to what we considered to be a deceptive approach used by the reporter to get
his "cute" item. I concluded: "I'm looking forward to finding out what you think about this from an editor's point of view."

About a month later, still awaiting a reply, I phoned MacFarlane's office to be told that my letter had been "passed on" to City Editor Les Pyette. The latter's response was revealing: "I understand your concern as a parent...but I have to protect my reporters". Pyette had "passed on" my letter to John Cosway with a memo for immediate attention but...Cosway was away on vacation. The City Editor promised me a "definite" written reply.

Ho Hum...another month rolled by - it was January 5th, 1978. I decided to sweat this one out. I got Les Pyette on the line - but he had trouble remembering what it was all about. No, he really had not read my letter (I suppose he imagined the "concerned parent" would give up about here). I did some insisting - I demanded a written reply as promised. Oh...it appeared that Cosway had "just returned" from Florida and I would get my reply soon. I said I felt I was being given "the old run-around". Our masks of politeness (concerned parent, patient professional newsman) began to slip, and I got mine, in spades:

Why are you making such a big thing out of this?...you're making too much of it...you're anti-press...why don't you get your facts straight before you go ahead?

I pointed out, somewhat hotly, that the facts were in my letter which no one at the Sun had taken the trouble to read, it seemed. Anyway, I said, I had been a journalist myself and was not "anti-press" (whatever that meant) - I simply wanted the courtesy of a reply, to hear "your side of the story" as I put it.

Pyette asked me for the name of the school principal and said he would call to "get the facts" (was he implying that I had made it all up? I wondered). No call was received at the school. I was assured that Cosway would call me "that night". No call was received. I finished up by saying that I did not intend to drop the matter and might even take my complaint to the Press Council. Was Pyette daunted? "Go ahead" was the surly reply.

THE PRESS COUNCIL CAN'T ROAR BUT IT CAN SNAP AT THEIR HEELS

My "complaint" to the Ontario Press Council (January 19, 1978) was just a matter of form, since I knew they could only take up a complaint against a non-member paper with the "consent" of that paper. Getting the consent of the Sun in this case seemed remote indeed, since as far as I could judge, their wish was that I would just go away, another victim of "the old run-around". On the other hand, I felt it was worthwhile to draw the attention of the Council to this sort of arrogance and there was always the sporting chance that the Sun would have to recognize my existence if they heard from Ottawa.

Amazingly enough a (totally unexpected) reply from the Sun arrived (February 8) a few days before Fraser MacDougall, Executive Secretary of the OPC had written me to the effect that:

D.J. Creighton, publisher of the Sun
has told the Council that he does not wish it to deal with your complaint, saying "I have written to Mr. Baker and feel that the episode is closed". Consequently, the Council is not able to do anything further with your complaint.

This was cold potatoes - but I actually had on my desk that Sun letterhead...I had to give the Press Council credit for coming up with a snap at the heels (I would have preferred a healthy roar). I wondered ungraciously whether Creighton had fished out my defunct letter from Cosway's in-tray?

The publisher's letter began with an apology "for your not receiving a reply from us. We feel that any letter we receive deserves a reply." In the next paragraph, Creighton said he thought my daughter's reply in the interview was "cute", adding:

That belief obviously was not shared by you or Naomi. That is unfortunate, but I don't see what we can do other than to say we are sorry.

I thought of sending a duplicate to the others who had not shared "that belief"...but maybe the nitty-gritty about journalistic ethics was coming:

SIDEBARS:

1. "...after four and a half years of Council history, one can see emerging...a collection of adjudications which together have considerable substance...One such area encompasses questions of access to newspaper columns by members of the public...complaints in this general category have made up a high proportion of those brought to the Council...What do come up generally are rather questions of fairness, of ethical obligation, of responsible newspaper practice under modern conditions". (OPC Annual Report, 1976, pp. 1-3).

2. "Traditionally, the media...have thin skins when it comes to criticism about themselves. They can dish it out - but don't like to take it." (From an article by Peter Worthington, Editor, The Toronto Sun, January 3, 1978, p. 11).
the message". ("My work is a footnote to Innis" McLuhan has declared).

Innis' contention was that media define the development pattern of a nation. He had arrived at this insight after his work on the staples trade in Canada - the fur trade, cod fisheries, newsprint, and timber.

As Carl Berger wrote in The Writing of Canadian History: "The fur trade was the economic basis of New France and, in Innis' judgement, the trade severely weakened the colony and ultimately accounted for its collapse...The pursuit of furs drew men away from the settlements precisely the time of year when they were the most necessary to agriculture. True to his essentially liberal and anti-statist outlook he believed that the authoritarian institutions of New France, and the control of the external trade by monopoly were incompatible with economic diversity. The fur trade reinforced the dependence of the colony on the mother country." For Innis, agriculture, industry, transportation, trade, finance and governmental activities tended to become subordinate to the production of a staple.

Was Innis a Marxist? In his books on the staples he recognized only the significance of the economic, geographic and technological features of history. Cultural, linguistic and religious differences were not salient determinants of activity. Material realities alone counted and Berger concludes: "His history, as history, was dehumanized."

But he was strongly opposed to centralization of any kind, resented control methods and was critical of planning and manipulation. He admired both Veblen and Marx. "Marx contributed much in building the ladder to escape from his enemies, his followers and himself. The ladder was the search for meaning in economic factors in interpreting history. It began with the appraisal of economic bias in contemporary life." And bias brought him to explore the role of communication and media in history. Participants in the conference included:


DEBATING POLITICAL ECONOMY: Martin Robin (Political Science/SFU) Dallas W. Smythe (Communication/SFU) Wallace Clement (Sociology/McMaster) Daniel Drache (Political Science/York) Reg Whitaker (Political Science/Carleton) Ian Parker (Economics/Toronto). Evening address, Donald Creighton, on "Innis, The Man."


CULTURAL DOMINANCE AND COMMUNICATION IN THE NORTH: Noel Dyck (Sociology/SFU) Lióra Salter (Communication/SFU) Paul Koroscil (Geography/SFU) Gail Valaskakis (Communication Studies/Concordia) Peter Usher (Ottawa) John Steeves (Political Science/SFU) Arlon Tussing (Economics/Alaska).