
It is possible to get almost to the end of Cross-Media Ownership and Democratic Practice in Canada: Content Sharing and the Impact of New Media without noticing that there is very little in this book about the effects of big media on democracy. Partly, this appears to be the result of a reluctance on the part of the authors to directly engage with concerns about big media, the news, and democracy—all of which date back to Walter Lippmann (1889) and have travelled more or less intact and unaddressed from print and broadcast to the Internet. Mostly, however, the book leaves the impression of a group of researchers blindsided by events, unable to start over, and unwilling to let go of or reinterpret their research.

There is no question that Soderlund, Brin, Miljan, and Hildebrandt are victims of time overtaking their subject matter. This book is the result of a 2007 content analysis of select areas of the Canadian media, matched up with a range of interviews with “politicians, policy analysts, regulators, Canadian journalists and labour leaders, as well as journalism professors in Canada and the United States” (p. 79). The goal: to offer a “comprehensive view of the status of Canadian media in the age of cross-ownership” (p. 79). That would be a tall order at the best of times. However, as the authors say in the opening lines of their preface, the difficulty in examining the impact of convergence on mass media through content analysis is “that the subject has a nasty way of shifting ground very quickly.” “Nasty” is a mild adjective for the storm surge that overturned this boatload of data.

The authors examined newspapers and newscasts controlled by Canwest Global, CTVglobemedia, and Quebecor. This was before the first organization was broken up, the second one drastically reorganized, and before the last one founded an all-news network—and began strip-mining its print properties to finance it.

Still, the authors repeatedly draw one interesting conclusion from their content analyses: there is not much difference in the news reported in the print and electronic media controlled by one company and that of news reported across all Canadian media. The fact that both CTVglobemedia and Canwest Global had, more or less, failed to find a way to converge their newsrooms seems a lesser revelation than empirical evidence pointing to what theorists have been claiming for years: that large, industrial media tend to produce a bland, formulaic institutional brand of journalism that rarely, if ever, strays beyond the boundaries of what Daniel Hallin called the “sphere of legitimate controversy.”

To be fair, the researchers are far from oblivious to these concerns, and they mention them in passing several times. As they point out, the research “does not address questions regarding the quality [italics in original] of content or whether the information available in Canada’s mass media is limited in its variety, especially with respect to providing alternative viewpoints to mainstream perspectives. Nor does the study deal with the question of those issues that were not covered by major media outlets, although a convincing case might be made for their newsworthiness. An examination
of these questions would have required a very different research approach than the one employed in this study” (p. 97).

Actually, the content analysis could almost certainly be used to explore the sameness of news coverage across companies and media. By setting out to show that convergence had failed, the authors’ research also exposes a strong uniformity of thinking among media across the country, with the possible exception of the CBC. As well, the fact that the research was done during four randomly selected weeks strengthens the results. It is not as if press management could point to compelling news events to explain the fact that the authors found sameness in both news judgment and source material.

Where the book falls down is in its second section, where the authors interview mostly anonymous media managers (who can hardly be expected to be terribly critical of their own practices) and observers, concentrating on the question of the converged newsroom. For one thing, allowing many subjects to remain anonymous severely weakens the arguments and evidence; it is impossible for the reader to weigh the strength of arguments made by faceless executives of nameless media companies. Still, interesting material surfaces, particularly in the discussions about the Quebec media, which is so heavily defined by the presence of Quebecor. Yet, the focus is held tight on convergence, so much of the most interesting material is presented as asides and addenda. One could go so far as to invoke C. Wright Mills’ comments about abstracted empiricism, and the hollowness of empirical research without connection to real-world concerns. Here, the authors appear to be uninterested in applying their research to the large body of criticism pointing to the leveling and diluting effects of industrial media on the craft of journalism.

The authors do their level best to compensate for the fact that their material has been rendered obsolete by including such statements as “our research has presented us with a first-time snapshot,” and “we fully realize that at the end of this project we have left students and researchers an impressive agenda of unanswered questions to be addressed, and we believe that is as it should be” (p. 102). Still, a bit of reorganization and some harder, wider-ranging interviews might have gone a long way in focusing and freshening up those questions.

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