Reviews


On September 2, 1917, Canadian Press (CP) was born, becoming the first news agency in Canada to regularly and systematically deliver national and international news content to newspapers across the country. A coalition of competing newspapers founded the agency, modelling it after Associated Press (AP), its American counterpart. Shortly after its inauguration, Robert Borden, Prime Minister of Canada, graciously exclaimed that CP's services would “aid in the growth of a national consciousness and a truly national spirit” (p. 49). Despite the agency’s longevity, it has received limited scholarly attention. The most comprehensive study of the agency, (CP): The Story of Canadian Press, was published in 1948 by Mark Edgar Nichols, one of CP’s founders and former presidents. Since then, only a handful of short scholarly publications have been focused on the organization.

This gap may seem surprising, writes Gene Allen, who passionately compares CP to CBC/Radio-Canada, proclaiming that the national news agency may have been a more influential cultural institution in the country than the national public service broadcaster. CP may have been organized as a not-for-profit co-operative, and its long-standing principle of “one paper, one vote” (p. 53) may have given credence to this feat. Unlike the CBC, however, CP’s member organizations were mostly for-profit corporations that were accountable to their shareholders, not to the Canadian public. Although it is arguably difficult to compare and measure the relative impact of these cultural institutions, Allen’s text undoubtedly makes clear that CP was an important figure alongside the CBC, as it was the main provider of the public broadcaster’s initial newscasts. It cannot be a mere coincidence, then, that Borden’s comments above are strikingly similar to parts of the CBC’s current policy mandate in the 1991 Broadcasting Act, for instance, to “contribute to shared national consciousness and identity” (Government
of Canada, 1991, art. 3[m][vi]). Thus, Allen’s *Making National News* is a welcome contribution to the study of news agencies and to Canadian journalism history.

Drawing on archival research, including an extensive array of untapped documents and unrestricted access to CP’s company archives, Allen traces a history of the agency from its inception to around 1970. This book, Allen explains, is “an account of how a durable nationwide news system was organized in Canada, and how this contributed to the development of an imagined community, systematically and permanently drawing Canadians more closely together in an increasingly integrated national cultural space” (emphasis in original, p. 13). Within a context of “print-capitalism” (p. 15), CP was simultaneously national, international, local, and regional. This book is an “institutional study” and an examination of the “mediated nation,” the aim of which is “to chart the connections between … culture and structure” (emphasis in original, p. 16). Allen tells this history of CP in connection to recognizable themes in Canadian history, including the construction of Canadian identity. He shows how the nation-building project was established and sustained through Canada’s tensions with Britain and the United States as well as through the country’s integration of communication technologies for capitalist development. At the same time, Allen emphasizes that it is not a triumphalist narrative of nationalism, as CP’s history reveals a contested national project.

In the book’s seven chapters, Allen clearly illuminates chronologically how CP contributed to an imagined nation as well as had nationalizing and globalizing effects by drawing on a few main issues per chapter. In Chapter 1, for example, he discusses the origins of the agency, teasing out the early national-international tensions between CP and AP within the global and imperial news system. In this chapter, he also elucidates the frictions between the federal government and news publishers over financial assistance as well as between publishers in Western Canada, the Maritimes, and Central Canada (where CP was based) over competing regional interests. Chapter 3 demonstrates that as CP evolved during the initial years of radio broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s, the organization became a key national force to resist the inculcation of U.S.-based radio news. It formed a strategic alliance with Canada’s public broadcaster, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC)—the precursor to the CBC—supplying news to CRBC stations. In Chapter 4, Allen describes how CP was a nation builder in wartime. In the agency’s news coverage of World War II, the broader foreign coverage of the war was an epiphenomenon to national coverage of the increasing number of Canadian soldiers and military actions overseas. The agency was also complicit in the government’s regulations to censor some of this coverage.

Throughout *Making National News*, Allen tirelessly highlights gaps in Canadian communication studies through these recurrent themes; they may seem trite and overdone, but Allen convincingly points out extreme oversights that deserve our attention and that can deepen our understanding of those themes. In addition to building on familiar themes from new directions, the book makes an important contribution to the literature by addressing the long-standing labour blind spot in journalism history (Hardt, 1995). Chapter 5 is focused on the initial attempts of the American Newspaper Guild (ANG) to unionize CP’s rank-and-file editorial employees in 1950, showing how the
agency adopted an anti-union campaign to successfully resist the organization drive. CP cut back its services significantly, fired more than 25 percent of its journalists, and transferred pro-union staff. The agency was concerned that an ANG contract would lead to salary increases. Another major concern was that the ANG was U.S. based and affiliated with the politically charged Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), so it would threaten the “neutrality” and “nationality” of CP’s conventional journalism practices (p. 187). Employees eventually won union certification in April 1950, but they de-certified in March 1953 due to CP’s firm opposition, nearly resulting in the agency’s demise. Not until 1976 would CP’s editorial staff affiliate again with the ANG. Through his discussion of labour and class struggles between newspaper owners and wage labourers over working conditions, pay, editorial autonomy, and union recognition, Allen persuasively elucidates a key contradiction: although CP was a not-for-profit co-operative agency, it prioritized economic concerns, thus embodying a capitalist stereotype. In addition, this chapter is a remarkable example of how structure and cultural agency are mutually constitutive.

Despite the book’s strengths, this attention to labour issues also illuminates one of the limitations of Allen’s approach: some of the topics crosscut numerous decades, so the narrative structure seems fragmented and disjointed in places. For instance, in Chapter 2, Allen introduces CP’s first major labour conflicts, the 1919 and 1924 strikes of the Commercial Telegraphers Union (CTU), in the broader context of struggles to sustain the agency financially (pp. 77–78). Although he briefly refers to the 1924 strike in Chapter 5, it may have been more effective to discuss the earlier labour conflicts in depth in that latter chapter in order to contextualize the ANG campaign. When one reads about later events alongside the 10-day strike of 1924, it is not surprising that CP would vigorously contest the ANG union drive: following the 1924 strike, the agency withdrew its recognition of the CTU. To establish stronger coherence, then, Allen could have organized the text thematically rather than chronologically. It is only in Chapter 7 that Allen breaks the chronological flow, notably focusing on how the changing form and content of CP’s routine and daily news coverage “enunciated a Canadian identity” (p. 284) throughout its history. Another possible limitation is that Allen is obviously indebted to the historical method, so the book reads as a painstaking academic text. As a result, the text may be less accessible to a non-scholarly audience and to lower-level undergraduate journalism students. However, this text should be read by a broader audience, especially because Allen has strived to make CP and the legacy of news agencies more visible in order to comprehensively understand how journalism has evolved in this country.

Even with these concerns, Making National News is generally a persuasive and consistent text that adheres to scholarly conventions. The book serves its purpose well, establishing the significance of Canadian Press and the role of national news agencies in general as purveyors of national consciousness and cultural identity. It would be suitable for upper-level undergraduate and graduate-level courses on Canadian journalism history, cultural history, or media organizations.
References


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