BOOK REVIEW

Arthur Siegel

Politics and the Media in Canada

Reviewed by
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What does the Canadian mass communication system have in common with the Toronto Argonauts? Great starts, lousy follow through.

While hardly the major point of Arthur Siegel's new book, Politics and the Media in Canada, the quip does back into one of his main concerns. Siegel's complaint about the number of times some Canadian pioneering effort in communication suffered from the punch of foreign (mainly American) follow-through technologically or culturally provides the pith of "The U. S. Problem," one of four centrifugal forces bedeviling Canadian mass media. The others are geographical size, population dispersion, and bilingualism.

In a work that examines Canada's daily newspaper, radio and television industries, with special attention to their role in Canadian nation-building, Siegel sees the country responding centripetally in two ways: (1) developing technology to bind the country with hardware; and (2) legislating rules, sometimes against principles of press freedom, to spur the media to do right in Canada.

Siegel hastens to add that technology alone--
Anik, Telidon, fibre optics, etc.—can do little for nation-building if vital content, the all-important stuff that flows through channels, is sadly wanting. Siegel further argues that even with voluminous amounts of information on a national scale—e.g., C.B.C., and the "national" Globe and Mail—the job may not get done if the overall effect of the messages is perceived negatively. Hence, in contradistinction to the early, and perhaps naive, UNESCO belief that more information is better, Siegel echoes a number of recent writers who, having taken a closer look at the communication-nation-building tie, raise the spectre of the mass media actually threatening rather than enhancing the nation-building process.

Why so little attention has been paid to the proposition that more information about something or someone could lead just as well to rejection may be a commentary on the human optimism that informed much thinking about mass communication potential following World War II. For Canada, already buffeted by regional, linguistic and cultural disparities and animosities, Siegel implies the dissolution of the Confederation. That is to say, if the mass media do their job well, efficiently and in a non-partisan manner, readers and viewers may receive so much raw information as to be convinced that the differences are insurmountable and the best course of action is to forget entirely the idea of Canada.

But Siegel, definitely leans in the opposite direction. Although he doesn't think the mass media have performed particularly well in advancing the cause of nationhood, largely because they have been preoccupied with their own economic interests (e.g., p. 103: "The profit margin for newspapers is among the highest in the industrial sector....Only the private broadcasters and the beverage industries showed similar levels of profitability.") and popularity ratings, Siegel is on
the side of the angels when he avers: "Good journalism is not in conflict with the national interest; rather, it promotes it" (p. 249).

Unfortunately, his defence of that laudable view would be more convincing with greater elaboration and stronger arguments. Siegel claims that mass media contribute to nation-building not by any one activity but generally by fulfilling their information, interpretation, entertainment and education functions. He leaves readers crying for the elaboration of that relationship when he seeks "refuge, approvingly, in an observation by Denis McQuail, a British sociologist, "that a major function of the media is 'to increase integration and consensus in a society, to bridge social gaps and maintain continuity over time'" (p. 12).

The reader, here, might correctly surmise that "politics" in the title refers to nation building. However, Siegel has other designs on the word; it is a multipurpose term to include politics among the media themselves, within one medium, between media and other institutions such as government. In enumerating five sources of what he calls "mass media political power" that most journalists and communication scholars would be familiar with, they are presented with so little comment that the reader might be left wondering about their efficacy--Provider of information, political linkage between public and government, agenda-setting in choosing what to print or broadcast, editorial offerings, and influence of politicians--look good on paper, but one has to wonder what the evidence is.

The additional material Siegel presents is as expansive and as varied as the media landscape itself, although by no means complete in detail: constitutional and legal restraints, a special section on the 1981 Kent Commission recommendations, the economic structure and wealth of the
newspaper and broadcasting industries, the Canadian Press and the Parliamentary Press Gallery, and French-English differences under federalism.

Siegel's wrap-up chapter is both a summary and a warning that the '80s will continue to be a time of testing for the mass media, faced with intensified collision-course tendencies unleashed by Canada's new constitution (especially the Charter of Rights provision on press freedom), the aftermath of the Kent Commission, and the proposed Canada Newspaper Act: "the media as watchdog of government is faced with the dilemma of government as the watchdog of the media" (p. 234). Ultimately, it may not be incorrect for the Canadian mass media to be read as a metaphor for the state of Canada itself and the class of values that face the nation.

As might be expected in a book of this scope, the quality of the chapters are mixed. Unexpectedly, the one on nation-building is disappointing because its historical focus on newspapers carry so few lessons for the present; when Siegel turns to radio and television, the story changes since an explicit mandate for tying Canada together was included in the case of the broadcasting media.

On the other hand, Siegel presents well-organized, thorough and readable accounts of Canada's freedom-of-information debate, the surprisingly oppressive (for an avowed democratic system) history of Canadian secrecy practices and regulations, and the alarming extent to which divergent, at times conflicting, views of newspapering and reportage inform French- and English-language dailies and newspeople working in the same country, presumably with little or no exchange between them. This last especially augurs ill for the future of Canada if, as Siegel asserts, communications speaks to the very survival of the country (p. 248).
Besides the several criticisms already lodged, there are a few other points with which one might take issue. Understandably the choice to exclude weeklies, magazines, and films undermines the completeness criterion since these, too, are mass media. More than these, however, I wish Siegel could have mentioned the ethnic press. In making this special pleading, with nation-building foremost in mind, it does seem unfortunate it was overlooked in a book about a country that not only glorifies, but also makes a policy of, multiculturism federally and provincially, and where one of the major themes deals with fragmentation of both the mass media and political systems.

One also will search long and hard to find a full discussion of such press-politics "chestnuts" as news manipulation and management, the political role of press conferences, public opinion and polling, in a convenient format. The searcher will have to be satisfied instead with scattered references of each to illustrate other points such as freedom of information or secrecy.

There are times when Siegel's prose takes on a Book of Lists breathlessness with accounts of "the first," and "the most" of some Canadian communication minutiae, although taken as a whole the wealth of data is valuable and essential to the development of a larger body of academic literature on the country's mass media. Coming as it does on the heels of Edwin Black's Press and the News (reviewed in the Canadian Journal of Communication, September 1982), Siegel's book is bound to be compared to Black's. To be able to do so in itself is a healthy sign for this yet-embryonic area of study.

Both are practicing journalists-turned-political-scientists and write readably, but, their styles and approaches contrast enough to make
their books more complementary than competitive. Siegel's heavily-descriptive account of the mass media industries contains useful and recent data, surprisingly current given the lead-time needed for book publishing, while Black's discursive narrative cast in a political communication function framework presupposes, without relying upon, those data. Perhaps both books will provoke still others to get into the act soon.

Siegel closes on a somewhat hopeful note by challenging the Canadian communication system "to create a conduit for the dynamic harvesting of values that reflect the regions, the languages and the cultures of Canada." Truly, a tall order. Yet, for soothsayers and social scientists who read significance into the Argo's 1982 Grey Cup appearance, perhaps the great Canadian follow-through in mass communication is imminent.