For 25 years now, Québec journalists have fought long and hard for the gain and the defense of their rights. Now that they have acquired the conditions under which they may practice their profession with dignity, never have they been so preoccupied by their responsibilities. This is why the future of journalism in Québec is very promising.

**Aging Newsrooms**

According to a study conducted by Impact Recherche last fall for the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, the journalist in Québec is, on the average, 40 years of age, works for a Montreal daily and secures a yearly income of over 50,000 dollars. It might be added that more often than not, he is a union-member and has foolproof job security benefits. Since increases in personnel are just about non-existent in our newsrooms (in fact, budget cuts often amount to the reduction of personnel) and journalists now at their posts have another twenty years of an active career ahead of them, rarely do the doors open for the upcoming generation of journalists. The problem of injecting new blood in our newsrooms is becoming dramatic. Young journalists are more and better educated. Though there are many of them, rare are the openings in the larger newsrooms.

**Profile of a Journalist: White, Male and French-Canadian**

The Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec held a convention in December 1987 under the theme: the media and the pluralism of Québec society.
On this occasion, the Fédération observed that journalists stemming from ethnic communities (communities other than French or English) were, to all intents and purposes, virtually absent from our French newsrooms. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, particularly in the Télévision Quatre Saisons and La Presse newsrooms, journalists were not only white and French-Canadian, but also male (The Impact Recherche study shows that 7 out of 10 journalists are men). Special efforts must be made throughout the next few years to integrate into the newsroom women and journalists from the ethnic communities. It is a question not only of equity, but also of survival. Media that refuse to adapt to new socio-demographic values are running the risk of losing a great many readers who may no longer relate to them.

Relative Immunity

In Québec, as is the case elsewhere in the western world, authorities sometimes order the seizure of journalistic material (photographs, notes, documents, audio or video cassettes, etc.) or invite journalists to present themselves in court so as to reveal their sources of confidential information. Journalists, however, have always refused to succumb to such pressures, even under the threat of imprisonment.

For several years now, the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec has demanded, not only for its members but for the press in general, relative immunity by virtue of which seizures and court appearances would be forbidden except in cases where it may be proven that justice may not be served any other way.

This position is not one upheld unanimously and still stirs up many a passionate debate. Some journalists demand total immunity; others uphold the principle of relative immunity. Others do not want anything changed, fearing that any amendment brought to the existing legislation may add to the journalist’s privileges.

Divided over the legislative aspect of the debate, journalists remain unanimous when the time comes to build up judicial resistance. The times we gave in to a first wave of pressure have come and gone. Management is now fighting the same battle as are journalists. Mandates are verified, legal advisers are called in, procedures are disputed in court. Professionals refuse to reveal their sources in court thereby creating the feeling that as far as this aspect is concerned, immunity is almost acquired though no legislative changes have been brought about (the last conviction for refusal to reveal sources dates back to the early 70s).

Nevertheless, the debate is raging higher and higher. A clearer perspective of the question should be provided by the recent report tabled by a committee of the Barreau du Québec presided over by lawyer and journalist Florian Sauvageau. This report rejects the idea of a special status for journalists but proposes instead that
certain modifications be brought to the legislation in order to protect «journalistic activity and freedom of information». This is a document that provides an original approach, establishes enlightening nuances and distinctions and may not be ignored (see article by Gilles Lesage in Le 30 magazine, February 1989).

Quality Information and Ethics

The Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec was founded twenty years ago. Its main concerns are not labor conditions and relations (that is the mandate of the trade-unions). The Fédération sees to the quality of information, the survival of the freedom of the press, the public’s right to information and the protection of the public against abuse or mistakes made by the press.

In order to make good these objectives, the Fédération has equipped itself with a code of ethics called La charte du journalisme which lists eleven principles to which all of its members voluntarily adhere. These principles range from the verification and protection of information sources to the redress of journalistic errors, the right to protection of reputation and the presumption of innocence.

The creation of the Conseil de presse du Québec fifteen years ago was also the work of the Fédération. The council studies complaints received from the public. One of the oldest and most active press councils in Canada, it distinguishes itself from the other councils by permitting representatives of the public to join its ranks (six journalists, six representatives of the press business level, six representatives of the general public). In addition, its scope is not limited to the written press but includes radio and television networks as well.

It is clear now that journalists in Québec are already equipped with tools that contribute to heighten the quality of the information they convey to the public. This information generally answers to the highest standards of quality. Certain practices, however, remain questionable. Sometimes, the wish to be the first to air a particular fact (the race for a scoop) makes verification of uncertain facts impossible and contributes to lowering the quality of the information aired or published.

The cases where quality is sacrificed to the scoop are probably exceptions but unrestrained competition between various media is encouraging this trend.

The Media Marketplace

Montreal counts six dailies, six commercial television networks and twenty-five radio stations. Weeklies abound and numerous are the monthlies. No one may complain of this abundance.

However, the multiplication of publications and broadcast licenses are forcing enterprises to fight for their share of the advertising market, a market that does
not always grow rapidly. There are more and more of us to share the cake. So as to secure their share, dailies establish strategies based on very elaborate market studies. These strategies attempt to identify unsatisfied needs and to offer the public what it really wants. Radio and television network ratings play somewhat the same role.

Contrary to what is generally admitted, competition does not favor but rather causes a certain levelling and lowering of the quality of media content. In an attempt to maintain their position in the mainstream and please the greater share of the market, the larger media have come to offer relatively similar packages based on market research and analysis of target market needs. Information is marketed like any other consumer product. The choice of newsroom priorities and resource sharing is based on marketing criteria. If studies show, for example, that the public wants more articles on show business, two more journalists will be assigned to this sector while two others will be taken away from the labor sector. Special reports and documentaries interest a smaller share of the market? They will disappear and be replaced by a more gentle, more human approach. This approach will be generalized in such a way as to make real choices more and more rare.

As we can see, commercialisation of information favors competition where a greater share of the public is the prize. However, it is not certain that the right of the public to information is better served this way.

Faced with this trend, Québec journalists must reflect upon how to promote values of excellence and rigour while remaining open to the new socio-demographic realities of their environment.