BOOK REVIEW

A POOR APOLOGY FOR THE STATE OF OUR MEDIA

THE MAKING OF THE CANADIAN MEDIA

By Paul Rutherford

McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited

A Review by

Glen Gilpin

Paul Rutherford, self-styled "happy consumer" of our media has written a lot of words in his book The Making of the Canadian Media without saying anything that has not been more eloquently put by the proponents of private broadcasting and other entrepreneurs in this country. He attempts to disguise his position in the introduction by stating that "I must make clear two qualifications...first, the book does not attempt to apply to the history of the media any theory or model concocted by a great thinker...secondly, the book does not pretend to be the final word." Yet the aim of the book is to investigate the historical significance of communications in Canada and in saying that "some readers may well discover echoes of the philosophy of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, in particular their emphasis on the cultural importance of communications systems." Rutherford admits that he is, like all other individuals, conditioned to a large extent by the society in which he lives. He first concentrates on the daily newspapers, stopping briefly to delve into the story of magazines, books and movies.

In the opening section he surveys the rise of the newspaper in Canada in a rather narrative straight forward manner. He discusses "freedom of the press" and relates it to free competition advertising and its alliance with political parties. He emphasizes that during this period, capital requirement for entry into the industry was low. He does not show that the numbers which survived were papers that had financial backing in the form of advertisements from government parties, whose chief concern was to assist the rising national bourgeoisie in shaping the cultural viewpoints of the society in general to match theirs. Yet even in relatively uncontentious areas, there are omissions. However, in this narrative description he shows the role of the press in Quebec as providing catharsis dogma and politics, and in English Canada the neglect of this cultivation of the higher life of mankind. There was no overt attempt to radically change the nature of the two presses even after the development of the Telegraph; which should have caused an increase in the flow of intercolonial news. This failure to some extent allowed for the development of independent cultural solitudes.

The closer Rutherford gets to contemporary times the more fallacious the intent of his book becomes. In the golden era of the press, he tries to show the press as no longer allied to a class but a collection of individual entrepreneurs. He uses statements such as "Roy Thomson proved a voracious consumer first of radio stations and even more of small city weeklies." He further relates all this to something called "the bourgeois ethos," a term used so vaguely that it cannot illuminate the relationship between a class, its values and the form of their dissemination.

He further tries to push his ambiguous private industry arguments with statements such as "The surge of media concentration merely demonstrated that the 'communication' industry was a business like any other wherein bigness and growth were necessary to survive." In doing this he refuses the contention that the media operate as an organ in our society to shape its history, and to demonstrate that Canada's media were almost politically and socially impotent. He refuses to realize that newspaper owners or more accurately media owners as individuals are members of an owning class and of necessity for their survival as a group of people. It requires the production of ideas, of which they have no better organ than the media to socialize the readers with their views of the world. Thus in showing the media owners as politically and socially impotent he ignores or skips over several other questions. Why was the regular media not able to overcome the obstacle of ethnic newspapers in an attempt to assimilate these groups into the majority society? What of the nature of the ties between the media and other enterprises and the difficulty of distribution, or the problems of scale which inhibited growth on either the British or the U.S. model?

In neglecting the above questions, especially the latter, the author was able to mention the Air Commission and the LaMarsh Report. To some extent he paraphrased their recommendations without showing that these reports and others which he did not mention were necessitated by the clash of ideologies caused by the flow of information from a country whose ideology is basically free enterprise to a country with a predominately public enterprise ethos. Thus he was able to speak of
the role of the CBC and its contribution towards a Canadian identity with disdain by equating the CBC with other private enterprises who operate largely in the lucrative metropolitan markets of this country with minimum production cost. He did not realize that the role of the CBC in essence was supposed to provide a flow of information in two directions from the centre to the periphery and vice versa, that it was not intended to be an "industry" but a service.

Rutherford continues on his path of mis-information by calling himself an addict instead of a critic of the media. He does this to provide us with an understanding as to why he clings to a myth thrown out long ago by even conservative economists...that the free market is the purest expression of democracy and that they only reflect consumer preference. Well, we all are aware of the freedom to choose between the various newspapers of Toronto or Vancouver or Regina. The owners as members of the business world and most of their employees share a particular worldview as a result certain types of information gain priority over others and a control over access to the resources that help to do a good job of saying what needs to be said. Such a complaint against the system would not be valid, for he says, "the multimedia are subject to the discipline of the marketplace wherein the consumer's dollar is at bottom, sovereign."

The author further uses this last quotation as a double edged sword to enforce the idea that private enterprise had no real choice in only producing or purchasing from the United States, programmes that satisfy consumer demands. Owners of these enterprises said to be limited by the hybrid nature of the communication system and the small size of the Canadian market, making difficult the profitable manufacture of a multitude of seemingly unique messages.

He then introduces historical data such as "in 1931 the total value of American newspapers and magazines imported into Canada was well over $4 million. Total domination was only stemmed by Maclean's" and to further reinforce the observation that throughout the history of this country foreign ideas have played an extraordinarily prominent part in the formation of Canadian opinion. So what he is really saying, then, is "dear fellow Canadians don't blame us for using the overflow of American media and messages to make a profit; we are only doing what the consumer, who is sovereign in our free market, requires of us." As a result of this attitude by media owners and managers, Canadian media producing indigenous material became hopelessly crippled by American competition.

Equally fallacious is the author's belief that larger newsrooms lead to greater control by the journalists over content. Their "sphere of authority" he says however limited, allows them to control the flow of information according to their own presumption without much managerial supervision. The possibility that spheres of authority might become so limited as to be meaningless does not seem to have occurred to him.

Finally, through syntax and style as evident in statements such as "The Editorial staff of CP have a peculiar importance" followed by "the nationalist crusade, likewise a reawakening puritanism, have now merged with the third wave of reaction to save the Canadian democracy" become meaningless to the reader.

This book in general is a poor apology for the state of our media. It would be impossible for me to recommend it as a real contribution to the role of the media in Canadian history.

FOOTNOTES

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