

## 1. Introduction

*“Maybe not all of you understand exactly what it takes to make a great newspaper. It takes a great owner – period. An owner who commits herself with passion and the highest standards and principles to a simple search for the truth.”*

*Benjamin Bradley*<sup>i</sup>

Much has changed in the world of Canadian journalism since the early 1980s, when the *Royal Commission on Newspapers* expressed its deep concern over unprecedented concentration of Canadian newspaper ownership.

The *Commission* was concerned that most newspaper owners had an over-riding concern for profits, without which they could not survive and provide the “public service known as news.”<sup>ii</sup> There was a well-documented malaise in Canada’s newsrooms: journalists were concerned about the quality of their newspapers and that they were losing resources to the bottom line. The papers were increasingly less and less capable of providing journalism on complex matters to their readers with truthfulness beyond just facts, demonstrating depth, perspective, comprehensiveness, significance and a social responsibility that transcended the profit motive.<sup>iii</sup> Journalists had lost confidence in their publishers,<sup>iv</sup> the people to whom they had traditionally looked to balance the freedom of editorial content against owner’s undeniable right to expect a profit.<sup>v</sup> The major concern was how newspaper owners would use their power and discharge public responsibility. The owners said they gave free reign to their employees, defined as publishers of individual newspapers, in the interest of diversity.<sup>vi</sup>

Some journalists now look back fondly at the 1980s – when English language newspapers were owned by five distinct groups – as the “Golden Age of Journalism.”<sup>vii</sup> Many of those newspapers were owned by the Southam News or independent owners who spent millions of dollars more than they reasonably had to in an attempt to provide the communities they served with quality newspapers, rather than just pad the bottom line.<sup>viii</sup> Editorial independence, as distinct from news content, reflecting local interests at each of its newspapers and promoting diversity of editorial opinion, was the hallmark of Southam and was expressed in its annual reports to shareholders. But the *Commission* recognized that those newspapers could fall prey to less scrupulous owners who might see an opportunity to mine and exploit their earning potential.<sup>ix</sup>

At the same time, the *Commission* also recognized that profitability was the “small beer” of the newspaper problem and that the “champagne” was power over the minds of Canadians.<sup>x</sup> It was only a possibility the *Commission* contemplated, because it speculated a conglomerate might one day exercise a property right over their content for political purposes. “But it can. Who knows when and how it may?”<sup>xi</sup> There was no clear relationship between what appears in newspapers and what their readers think, but the literature on the agenda-setting function of the mass media is clear. “The mass media

may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.”<sup>xii</sup> Conversely, if newspapers avoid addressing issues or events, unless their readers obtain their information elsewhere, there is no opportunity to think about what isn’t there.<sup>xiii</sup> Ultimately, the *Royal Commission* was concerned about restrictions on the diversity of views and opinions reaching Canadians through their newspapers.<sup>xiv</sup>

The worst fears of the *Royal Commission* began to unfold a decade later. The first shoe dropped in the early 1990s when Hollinger Inc, owned by Conrad Black, began acquiring shares in Southam Inc. from *The Toronto Star*. By the mid-1990s, Hollinger had acquired 58 of Canada’s 102 daily newspapers. Hollinger’s draconian methods were consistent and well-documented: upon acquiring newspapers, their newsroom budgets were cut ruthlessly, inevitably degrading their editorial quality.<sup>xv</sup>

Newsrooms, after all, are the only part of a newspaper’s operations which don’t generate revenue. If their overhead is cut, costs are reduced and profits increase. This danger was foreseen in a story in the *Montreal Gazette* in 1926. The president of Britain’s Institute of Journalists warned about the dangers of newspaper amalgamations in the interest of increasing profits. He argued: “The huge watering of capital must mean that huge profits had to be made, and that, in its turn, meant pandering to a lower and lower public taste instead of a constant effort to lift the public to higher standards of ethics and conduct.”<sup>xvi</sup> The journalists’ president said it was the duty of journalists “to resist the domination of finance in the editorial domain.”<sup>xvii</sup> As it will be seen, that historic ethical responsibility led journalists at one of Black’s Canadian newspapers, the *Calgary Herald*, into an unprecedented labour battle with their owner. It is now referred to as one of the darkest chapters in Canadian journalism history.

Secondly, Black used his Canadian newspapers to advance a conservative political agenda.<sup>xviii</sup> He used the *National Post* to move the issues of “tax cuts, the brain drain, private medicine and closer alignment to the United States” to the forefront nationally.<sup>xix</sup> His other media outlets followed suit also advancing that agenda relentlessly.<sup>xx</sup>

The second shoe the *Royal Commission on Newspapers* feared dropped on December 6, 2001. CanWest Global Communications Corp., the new owners of the 27 Southam Newspapers bought from Black, announced standardized national editorials would appear in the 13 largest daily newspapers across Canada, as well as the *National Post*. Rank-and-file journalists at one of the newspapers, the *Montreal Gazette* revolted by withdrawing their bylines in protest as provided for in a clause in their collective agreement; a job action that drew widespread attention from the news media in Montreal and Toronto. The Quebec National Assembly and back-bench members of the federal government also waded into the debate, sparking further media coverage. The politicians were concerned about the same issues raised by the *Royal Commission* decades earlier and argued that CanWest’s policy threatened editorial diversity in Canada and democracy itself. *The Gazette*’s managers, meanwhile, came down hard on their employees, sending

a negative message or “chill” to its journalists in the chain who might consider speaking out against Southam’s corporate policy.

Controversy over the national editorials touched down like a tornado again in Regina on March 4, 2002, when reporters at *The LeaderPost* in Regina used a clause in their collective agreement to pull byline off stories that appeared the next day to protest the rewriting of a story’s first sentence in which the national editorials were criticized by a *Toronto Star* editorialist speaking in Regina as censorship. The rewritten lead sentence cast the editorials in a positive light.<sup>xxi</sup> The Regina byline protest drew immediate attention from CBC and newspapers in eastern Canada. The reporters who pulled their bylines were formally reprimanded and those who spoke to the news media were suspended. Union officials have intervened on their behalf and the disciplinary action appealed.

This study is an examination of the extent to which legal mechanisms in the collective agreements of Canada’s English language newspapers enable Canadian journalists to take ethical stances on matters which invariably bring them into differing degrees of conflict with their editors and managers. The issue involves whether journalists have a primary responsibility to their readers, or whether their primary fidelity is to their employer. Such competing loyalties bring about ethical dilemmas which eventually can threaten their employment status. For many facing such dilemmas, it raises the difficult question of whether they even want to remain in the business when their ethics have been compromised.

Section Two details the research methodology used in this study.

Section Three reviews the literature on journalism ethics and Francois Demers’ argument that a rise of the “good employee model” in Quebec in the late 1980s constitutes a threat to journalistic professionalism.

Section Four is the point of departure for this study. The author is a former *Calgary Herald* journalist who worked at the newspaper for two decades. This study examines a dark underside of journalism rarely explored in the popular press and most texts on journalism ethics. Specifically, it examines, as a case study, the ethical dilemmas that non-unionized journalists at the *Calgary Herald* faced when the newspaper came under the ownership of Conrad Black’s Hollinger Inc. in the 1990s. For some, but not all journalists, ethical considerations were what drove them to support a move to seek union certification in 1998 and to eventually take part in a long, bitter, and ultimately unsuccessful strike for a first collective agreement in which the author was involved. It was never learned whether a first contract could have resolved their ethical concerns, because the strike ended after eight months when the vast majority of the striking journalists accepted severance packages and the fledgling union was decertified.

Section Five examines 65 collective agreements representing the collective agreements of 134 Canadian metropolitan daily and community newspapers (both large and small) that are meant to advance ethical journalism and professional integrity. It also

examines the extent to which, and with what success, those clauses have been used at Canadian newspapers, where such use has drawn the attention of their respective national union and guild leaders.

Section Six examines how the ethical clauses in collective agreements have worked in the past and examines the byline controversy at *The Gazette* in Montreal and at *The LeaderPost* in Regina for the diversity and censorship issues they raise. It also examinea the resignation of prominent Halifax columnist Stephen Kimber when a column he wrote that was critical of the national editorials was not used by the editors of *The Daily News*.

Section Seven conducts an analysis of 16 Canadian newspapers' coverage of the national editorial debate to quantify whether the arguments over diversity or censorship have merit.

Section Eight contains the author's conclusions and recommendations.

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<sup>i</sup> "She was a spectacular dame." *The Globe and Mail*. July 28, 2001. p. F9.

<sup>ii</sup> Canada. *Royal Commission on Newspapers* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1981) p. 27.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.* p. 218

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 27-28.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.* p. 219.

<sup>vii</sup> Peter Bakogeorge [Interview] February 19, 2002. Interviewed by Bob Bergen at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto.

<sup>viii</sup> *Op. Cit. Royal Commission on Newspapers*. P. 219.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.* p. 219.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.* p. 221.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.* p. 221.

<sup>xii</sup> Cohen, Bernard in Shaw, Donald L. and McCombs, Maxwell E. *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1977) p. 5.

<sup>xiii</sup> Hallman, Eugene. "Philosophy and the Market." *The Newspaper as a Business*. Vol. 4. Canada. *The Royal commission on Newspapers* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1981) p. 15.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Op. cit. Royal Commission on Newspapers*. P. 1.

<sup>xv</sup> Barlow, Maude and Winter, James. *The Big Black Book* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Limited, 1997) pp. 91-95; Winter, James. *Democracy's Oxygen: How Corporations Control the News* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997) pp. 30-37; Westell, Anthony. "The Last Post." *The Globe and Mail*. August 1, 2000. p. A11; Zeisman, Derek. Letter to the Editor. *The Globe and Mail*. August 3, 2000, p. A12.

<sup>xvi</sup> "Group Newspapers Danger to Public." *The Gazette*. Saturday, December 26, 1925.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>xviii</sup> Op. Cit. Winter: pp. 40-41. Op. Cit. Westell; Lloyd, John “Painting Britain’s papers Black.” *The Globe and Mail*. August 7, 2001. p. R2

<sup>xix</sup> Martin Lawrence. “Conrad Black bows out.” *The Globe and Mail*. August 25, 2001. p. A11.

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> Harper, Tim. “Reporters protest at Asper paper.” *The Toronto Star*. March 7, 2002. p. A2.