Document generated on 06/11/2025 9:50 a.m.

Acadiensis

ACADIENSIS

Making the News

Paul Rutherford

Volume 12, Number 1, Autumn 1982

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad12_1rv05

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)
1712-7432 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Rutherford, P. (1982). Making the News. *Acadiensis*, *12*(1), 136–144.

All rights reserved © Department of History at the University of New Brunswick, 1982

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

Making The News

Books about the media written by journalists have a bit of an unsavory reputation in academic circles. The journalist is thought to be an unregenerate storyteller who feels a need to excite his audience with a lot of colourful anecdotes and easy generalizations. He is reputed to write books that are light and entertaining, and so presumably suited to the popular taste. Some of the sneers fit the nine rather disparate works under consideration here. None of them can be considered a classic of its type: Canada hasn't yet given birth to its A.J. Liebling.[1] But whatever these authors have to say about the processes of journalism has intrinsic interest. If at times only by accident, each of their books delivers some insights into the world of news and its recent history.

Five of the books deal with the daily press, once Canada's premier news medium. The most uneven of all these works is also the most pretentious: *Canadian Newspapers* (Edmonton, Hurtig, 1980), edited by Walter Stewart, a collection of essays which is billed as "the inside story" on big city journalism. That's a misnomer. The book does boast 11 essays on various newspapers (none of them French Canadian though) and four essays on supporting institutions (like "CP", the "Canadian Press" news agency), plus Stewart's own introduction. These discussions come very much in the form of reminiscences: most of the authors are exiles from daily journalism, who as a result may have felt free to comment without worrying about the baleful eye of the publisher or his minion. The diligent reader can pick up useful information about news costs, the effects of competition, or forgotten controversies, but little is said about newsroom practices or the genre of news.[2] Much of the space is filled with bizarre stories and casual opinions. Tom Ardies contributes the worst piece of silly nostalgia about the Vancouver *Sun* of years ago, so determined is he to create the image of a"fun" newspaper. Harold Horwood, in his discussion of the St. John's *Evening Telegram*, manages to claim that the press' penchant for the government-inspired pseudo-event "kept Smallwood in power for nearly a quarter of a century" (p. 39). By contrast, Stewart and Michael Enright write interesting and perceptive accounts of life on the Toronto *Star* and the *Globe and Mail*. The best essay of the lot comes from the only francophone, Dominique Clift, whose "Solidarity on a Pedestal" roams widely over the history of the press and the profession in French Canada during the 1960s and 1970s. It seems Stewart was something of a casual editor, who let his authors write as they pleased.

The book's conclusions are ambiguous. At times, the authors seem unable to make up their minds about the state of the press. Stewart does claim that "the

1 His *The Press* (New York, 1961) remains one of the most fascinating accounts of the ways of print journalism.

2 By that phrase I wish only to suggest that news, like novels or monographs, is a particular kind of artistic endeavour with its own forms, content, techniques, etc.

standard of Canadian journalism is generally higher today than it was when I began in the business" (p. 15). He also observes that "the usual kind of paper in this country is small, unambitious, prosperous and, in most senses, quite dreadful" (p. 16). Roy MacGregor can call the press "for the most part, earnest, sincere and honest" (p. 194), yet damn the same press because it "has become as obsessed with trivia as the shallower media" (p. 199), by which he presumably means radio and television. A particular threat to quality news, so a number worry, is the growing popularity of "lifestyle" or "soft" journalism about people, products, and habits (". . . it's hard to burp in Winnipeg without being the subject of a full page, in-depth interview in the Trib").[3] And there appears, here and there, a general belief that too much coverage of politics and business favours the powers-that-be, celebrating or legitimating the establishment.

Who is to blame for the way things are? Clift identifies professionalism and commercialism as the twin determinants of news in French Quebec. During the early 1960s, he believes, many a reporter acquired a commitment to social change, a commitment linked to class interest — they wished to be numbered among the movers and shakers in the province. Their desire was part of the journalists' quest for professional status, and Clift's argument parallels other accounts of the aspirations and struggles of the "new" middle class in modern Quebec.[4] That commitment inevitably produced a bias for reform in the news, thereby privileging the forces of liberalism and eventually separatism. Running counter to this trend, however, was the profit-making zeal of the owners and managers which led them to push soft news in order to win over target audiences desired by advertisers. This package of lifestyle and sensation, of trivialized news, favoured what Clift calls "the consumer society." The divergent conceptions of news, aside from fostering bitter newspaper strikes, highlighted the internal contradictions within Quebec's society over the last two decades. Unfortunately, Clift lacks the space to do more than sketch his argument and throw in a few examples.

None of his compatriots attempt such analytical rigour, ironic proof perhaps of Clift's contention that Anglo reporters aren't ideologues or militants.[5] They do, however, display a tendency to depict the journalist as a victim of the system. Comprehensive, investigative, or advocacy news seems largely the result of devoted reporters and good fortune, except perhaps on the *Globe and Mail.* More often reporters have to battle against all kinds of odds to produce quality. So "geographical, demographical and logistical factors" are largely responsible for the "imperfections" of the Saint John *Telegraph-Journal* (p. 69); the pack

3 P. 136 The Winnipeg *Tribune*, of course, no longer exists as a result of the Southam/Thomson settlement of August 1980.

4 See for instance, Dale Postgate and Kenneth McRoberts, *Quebec: Social Change and Political Crisis* (Toronto, 1976).

5 Even though they too have sought a new professional significance — witness the causes and complaints of their magazine *Content* in the 1970s.

journalism of political reporters grows out of the "great numbers" of hopefuls assigned by editors across the nation to cover major stories (p. 199); "market surveys" that demonstrate a liking for "good news" foster timidity on the Toronto *Star* (p. 123); and the very environment at the Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* led David Gruending to become "an accomplice in censoring myself" (p. 145). Sometimes this smacks more of whining than reasoning; anyway, the blame for a rotten news product is shifted elsewhere.

Indeed, the authors like to single out management for the making of hack news. It amounts to a professional conspiracy theory: they, the paper's masters, set the tone of a newspaper. Stewart opens the book with a denunciation of Southam Inc. and Thomson Newspapers Ltd., the winners in the newspaper sweepstakes, for their devotion "to the advancement of mediocrity and the accrual of cash" (p. 9). Other essays offer lesser villains. The Dennis family and its executives, thinks Harry Flemming with some cause, have made the Halifax dailies renowned champions of "God, the Queen and Highway Safety" (p. 48). The awesome presence of Beland Honderich at the *Star*, at least according to Stewart, turned journalists into "courtiers" (p. 118), trying to win God's attention with the right story. The Siftons and their managers, insists Gruending, have forced the Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* to hue to the establishment line — the paper, supposedly, has been "on the wrong side of every major issue we've faced in Saskatchewan for the past fifty years" (p. 156). "All power corrupts," observes Harry Midgley, chronicler of the Edmonton *Journal*, "and the power to publish in one's own paper corrupts, if not absolutely, then nearly interminably" (p. 163).

Maggie Siggins' critical biography of *Bassett* (Toronto, James Lorimer, 1979) apparently bears out this new maxim. Her book is a fast-paced, sometimes exaggerated exposé of the antics of a playboy-entrepreneur. Another exile from daily journalism, Siggins portrays Bassett as a publisher who made his Toronto *Telegram* into a plaything that enhanced his stature and favoured his causes. She credits Bassett with perpetuating the *Tely*'s Conservative bias, diluting the paper's Anglo imprint to woo ethnics (especially the Jewish community), and employing the news to protect friends (notably the Eatons, co-owners of the daily) as well as to lambaste enemies (notably J. Wilfred Spooner, once a provincial minister of municipal affairs). He killed the *Tely* in 1971 when it proved worth more dead than alive.[6] The impression created disguises the fact that the news, on the *Telegram* as elsewhere, was and remains a collective product. The changes in the *Tely*'s news after the mid-1950s — a political focus, opinion pieces, a wealth of lifestyle features — had a lot more to do with changes in the newspaper industry and the profession of journalism than with Bassett.

6 Bassett worked out a good deal with his two rivals for around $19 million dollars, though debts and severance pay brought that down to $7 million. The *Star* paid $10 million for the *Tely's* subscription lists and $2 million for a two-year lease of the *Tely* presses; the *Globe* later purchased the *Tely's* Front Street establishment for $7 million (p. 182).

He had the power to set the newspaper's tone but not, in a routine fashion, to shape the daily news. If the *Tely* was, in Stewart's words, "a dreadful newspaper", that was the result in part of newsroom practices and the journalists themselves.

The charge against chain journalism may have more substance. James Lamb's memoirs, *Press Gang* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1979), recount his career on small weeklies and dailies, outside and inside the Thomson empire. The book is a very light one, and occasionally marred by nostalgia over the passing of small-town Canada. An extraordinary final chapter bitterly attacks Trudeau, the national media, and bigness in general as the villains which destroyed Lamb's remembered paradise. Actually, Lamb's account makes quite clear that the independent newspapers of a bygone era were not only eccentric, but also too often shoddy. So the Thomson papers, backed by the resources of a large company, "did offer a news service that was a marked improvement over that available at the time in small city dailies" (p. 183). Further, that company refrained from any editorial interference, and Thomson made a point of backing up his editors even in the face of pressure from advertisers. Unfortunately, the Thomson system transformed its dailies into a series of clones, each marketing much the same brand of news to win increasing profits. The publisher became a hired hand expected to run his newspaper within the confines of a detailed budget set by head office and to aggressively track down all possible sources of advertising revenue. A "hallmark" (p. 180) of Thomson journalism was the special edition on the town's progress, the main local industry, vacationing, Christmas, and so on. It was, of course, packed with advertising. News excellence counted for less and less, except that the paper was supposed to serve up the local news about people, sports, politics, and business that readers wanted. Journalists, naturally enough, were paid low wages to suit their modest functions, which ensured a high turnover of trained or experienced reporters. In short, the Thomson company created a press network across Canada noted for its high profits and bland news. Rarely was there a clearer case, in the print media, of news shaped by organizational imperatives. But recognize that this news was also shaped by the fact that most readers were willing to settle for the journalism of community service — and more news agency reports.

Chain journalism need not result in slick mediocrity. Stuart Keate's *Paper Boy* (Toronto, Clarke Irwin, 1980) documents a quite different pattern in the now defunct FP (Federated Papers) empire of big city dailies. Keate worked his way up the ladder until he became the publisher of FP's Vancouver *Sun* (1964-1978). His erudite memoirs, if a bit too full of trivia about people he knew or met (including Howard Hughes!), do supply a lot of information about newsmaking. R.S. Malone, a key manager of FP, apparently did try to convert the chain into something approaching the Thomson model — at least he wrote lengthy memos outlining what should or should not be done to maximize revenues. Malone failed. Although there was always an accounting, FP's publishers

were left pretty much up to their own devices to produce profitable dailies suited to their taste and their community's needs. "What matters in creating the character of a newspaper", Keate intones, "is not the bottom line but the editorial line" (p. 147). He elected to foster a balanced newspaper: lots of pictures and hard news, some fun and frolic as well as heavy politics, Bruce Hutchison's Liberal editorials versus Doug Collins' right-wing columns. Ironically, Keate's very eminence distanced him from the world of news. A typical day in his life, he writes, involved reading over the proofs of the opinion pages, some petty decision-making about jobs and money, and dealing with a host of outsiders. Undeniably, that routine did give him the power to influence the personnel and the priorities of the newsroom. But he kept direct intervention to a minimum. The newspaper had to run itself along familiar lines — and so the news was shaped by the input of the wire services, the assignments of editors, the ways of reporters, in short by journalistic convention. Keate's account highlights the imperfections of the conspiracy theory, and thus of Stewart's *Canadian Newspapers*.

Ironically, this conspiracy theory underlies much of the argument of the famous Kent Report — *Royal Commission on Newspapers, 1981* (Ottawa, 1981) — which was the collaborative result of the work of a number of journalists, past and present. The report is an excellent investigation of the newspaper industry, far better on the present situation than any of the other books. But the report lays the blame for most of the sins of the press at the doors of management. That body has the power. "The corporate proprietors or their agents determine the resources to be used for the newspaper's content, they choose the people, they set the tone, they establish the implicit guidelines for the what and how of the news and the why of acceptable comment," it appears. "They make their disclaimers in the morning but they go to bed knowing that their trusted agents keep their papers on their lines" (p. 233). The consequence, feel the commissioners, is a press which does not properly fulfill its "public-service mission" as an information utility in "an open, democratic society" (p. 163). Once more the journalist is cast as a victim, demoralized by the system, unable to exercise his proper control over the news on behalf of the public. The commissioners recommended some cumbersome mechanisms to get the conglomerates "out of the newsrooms" (p. 233) and to ensure "editorial independence" (p. 229). So the public interest has become the necessary justification for professional autonomy. Only give the reporters and editors more money and freedom and the chances are that the news will improve and opinionated controversy will flourish.

The Kent Commission identified the daily press "as the principal external influence on the agenda of public affairs" (p. 216). There is truth to the claim that a few newspapers, notably the *Globe and Mail* in the national arena, have a disproportionate impact on the views of all news media. But, in general, the Commission's presumption masks the fact that the press is no longer the pre-eminent force in the world of news. A Goldfarb poll of 1969 demonstrated that a sizeable

majority of individuals rated television the "most important" and "most believable" medium for national and international news.[7] That finding was confirmed by a poll conducted for the Kent Commission (p. 35). Television's verisimilitude results from its mix of script, voices, and visuals ("the camera never lies"), a sort of organized assault on the viewer's senses.[8] Even newsmen are victims of the medium's charms: thus Warner Troyer, an experienced CBC journalist, celebrates the hoary old myth of "TV's capacity to cut through hypocrisy and expose reality" (p. 211). That comment illustrates the quality of argument in his potted chronicle of the electronic media, *The Sound and the Fury: An Anecdotal History of Canadian Broadcasting* (Toronto, John Wiley & Sons, 1980). Troyer has neither the will nor the wit to tell us much that is novel in this coffee-table book; he combines many pictures, mostly of people, and an abbreviated text full of stories to focus on the colourful aspects of the broadcasting experience. A lot more can be learned about the actual history from other published sources, notably Frank Peers' magisterial studies.[9] But Troyer's book does suggest the journalist's will-to-power, an attitude that has become more and more fashionable in the profession over the past two decades. He condemns the bureaucratic milieu of the CBC which has apparently and improperly stifled the creative juices of reporters and producers. In a full chapter he praises above all the makers of "This Hour Has Seven Days" because they used their imagination to develop a programme that excited and agitated the public. And he believes that a vital part of the journalist's task is to tell viewers not just the who, what, where, when, and how but the why as well — where appropriate, "to add a personal response" (p. 8) to the news. Troyer seems blithely unaware that television news is very much a product of professional imagination already.

Not so Peter Trueman, although his memoirs *Smoke and Mirrors: The Inside Story of Television News in Canada* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1980) do in the end shy away from admitting the full import of his findings. Once a CBC news producer, Trueman won fame in Ontario during the 1970s as the Global Network's opinionated anchorman. While noting occasional triumphs, he recites a familiar litany of the sins of telenews: hypocrisy, the trivialization of events, constant sensation-seeking, self-censorship by newsmen, ultrabrevity, and dependence on outsiders (especially American news services). He quotes approvingly Harry Boyle's complaint that television news is "bitsy and piecey", dealing too much in "confrontations and catastrophes . . . and it doesn't really contribute very much to understanding, or any thought process or analysis" (p. 99). But all this criticism is overdone, since the purpose of telenews is to convey

7 Cited in *Good, Bad, or Simply Inevitable? Report of the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media, Vol. III* (Ottawa, 1970), p. 15.

8 See John Fiske and John Harley, *Reading Television* (London, 1978), pp. 159-170 for a lengthy discussion of television's "realism".

9 *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting, 1920-1951* (Toronto, 1969) and *The Public Eye: Television and the Politics of Canadian Broadcasting, 1952-1968* (Toronto, 1979).

"experience"[10] and confirm myths, not to send out great gobs of information like the *New York Times.* More appropriate is Trueman's explanation of how the news is made. He delves into the restraints imposed by too little money (a serious problem at Global), the burdens resulting from office politics (an equally serious problem at the CBC), the producer's power over the reporter (even in the news field, television enhances the influence of the producer), the need to find good visuals to hold viewer attention, the important role of the anchorman as storyteller (even if he is more actor than reporter), what presumptions determine "the news of the day" (including the cynicism of newsmen). In particular he identifies the bias of television news in favour of the status quo, which makes the medium an important agency of social control. *Smoke and Mirrors,* then, illustrates how organizational imperatives and journalistic codes manufacture a television version of reality rather than an objective report of what actually happened.[11]

But television, and the press as well, can determine what may happen. The news media play an especially important part in structuring politics in general, and election campaigns in particular.[12] Both Dalton Camp's *Points of Departure* (Ottawa, Deneau and Greenberg, 1979) and Clive Cocking's *Following the Leaders: A Media Watcher's Diary of Campaign '79* (Toronto, Doubleday, 1980) focus on the 1979 federal election campaign to show how far Canada has entered into the era of media-dominated politics. Camp poses as the skeptic taking a wry look at the shennanigans of politicians and reporters in heat. He seems to have written his account in a furious hurry — it is episodic, disorganized, at times superficial; even so, *Points of Departure* is filled with wit and insight; undeniably the product of a first-rate mind and a campaign veteran. Cocking, by contrast, tries to play the role of a concerned observer, out to chronicle the performance of election reporters. The result, while useful and interesting, doesn't match the achievement of Tim Crouse, best in the field with his book on American reporters.[13] Cocking's diary is much too long, anecdotal and episodic, and his conclusions are unsurprising.

Nowadays, Camp muses, "the game of politics is one played between politicians and the media" (p. 250). And Richard Gwyn, as quoted by Cocking, worries that "election campaigns may have become a fantasy, created by and for the media" (p. 188). Party organizers strive to determine news coverage by cosseting reporters, feeding the media headlines, controlling access to the leader, and concocting spectacles for the television cameras. The assumed power of tele-

10 Reuven Frank, cited in Edward Jay Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York, 1973), p. 39. Frank was executive producer for the NBC evening news in 1963.

11 This, of course, is not in itself a novel finding — see The Glasgow Media Group, *Bad News* (London, 1976) on British telenews. But Trueman's arguments are novel in their reference to Canada.

12 See Colin Seymour-Ure, *The Political Impact of Mass Media* (London, 1974).

13 *The Boys on the Bus* (New York, 1973).

vision to sway the uncommitted voter makes the politicos eager to get their "star" presented every night on the newscasts and to spend huge sums on political advertising to offset rival propaganda and the newsmen's images. Reporters search for colour and excitement, an issue a day, a close horserace between the leading contenders. Here too television exercises power since its successful development of news-as-entertainment, or so Cocking feels, has inspired newspapers to follow suit. In short, politicians strive to arrange a closed or scripted campaign, full of pseudo-events, whereas the reporters yearn for a wide-open campaign, full of sound and fury and accident.[14] Whoever wins, the electors are treated as a passive audience, their views continually probed by a few pollsters. No wonder that more and more election campaigns revolve around personality, a kind of subject that television handles well: R. Jeremy Wilson found that more than one-third of the coverage he surveyed in the 1979 campaign was made up of "horserace commentaries," CBC's "National" leading the pack with about 50 per cent of its time devoted to how the "stars" were doing.[15] Whether the media-dominated campaigns have much significance — whether they change votes or simply legitimate the democratic process — remains a moot point.[16] The fact is that news-making has manufactured a different kind of electoral politics.

Camp and Cocking are unhappy with the result. The organizational imperatives and the professional codes which determine the newsmen's actions seem ill-suited to the media's enhanced importance. Camp claims that "irreverence is the new mark of fashion for the journalist" (p.171) and found distressing "the ferocity of their neutrality" (p. 67). Cocking damns his fellows for their pervasive cynicism. But he also believes that the reporters themselves are very much victims of the system: "National election campaigns are the ultimate tests of upwardly (or downwardly) mobile journalists" (p. 273). Succeed by pleasing the editors or producers at home with spectacle and farce, or suffer a black mark on your record. Furthermore, immersion in the campaign turmoil cannot but engender tunnel vision and exhaustion, neither conducive to a proper handling of the deeper meanings of the contest.

We are living, so it's claimed, in the early stages of the "information society" in which knowledge is king: control over information and its distribution becomes the key to wealth, status, and power.[17] An exaggerated claim perhaps, but it does make clear the central role of newsmen as mythmakers in today's culture. The nine books reviewed here shed light on only a portion of the com-

14 This hidden battle has been analyzed at some length in the American instance — see Edwin Diamond, *Good News, Bad News* (Boston, 1980).

15 "Media Coverage of Canadian Election Campaigns: Horserace Journalism and the Meta Campaign", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 15 (Winter 1980-81), pp. 57, 59.

16 See Raymond Williams, *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (Glasgow, 1974), pp. 124-125.

17 Anthony Smith, *The Geopolitics of Information: How Western Culture Dominates the World* (London, 1980).

munications experience. None, for instance, delve very far into the audience response to the so-called "information overload" — how people interpret or employ the news in ways journalists cannot control. Few people believe that newsmen supply the unvarnished truth. That Goldfarb poll of 1969 indicated the doubts: a mere 12 per cent of respondents thought that the news media was "very honest in its reporting", while 69 per cent decided that the news was "controlled" or managed and somehow not "real news".[18] But people do take unkindly to the claims of importance, indeed the middleman role, of newsmen in the process of communications. Witness this anecdote of Dalton Camp in *Points of Departure.* At a political meeting during the 1979 campaign, some eager reporter hoisted himself onto a table the better to see Trudeau. "'Get down!' a woman shouted. 'I can't see!' 'Madam', the reporter said, turning to her, 'you're speaking to a member of the fourth estate'. 'I'm speaking to an asshole', the woman responded. 'Get off that table'." (p. 250). There is little evidence that the public favours any significant extension of the status or powers of newsmen, no matter what apologists of the profession may say about the journalist's mission to represent the public will.

What seemed most intriguing in these recent books was the critical tone that runs through all but Keate's memoirs. Journalists don't feel in control of the institution which gives them significance. They fail to recognize that news-making is a collective enterprise in which power is diffused through an elaborate division of labour and structure of authority. The rules-of-thumb that decide what is news amount to a slowly changing body of convention which reflects not only the dynamics of the industry and the profession but the needs and mood of society as well. News is a cultural artifact. No doubt management does interfere, directly or indirectly, in news-making, especially when the proprietor's interests are at stake (witness much of the editorial response to the Kent Report). But the reporter, commentator, anchorman, editor, or producer has a big say on what gets printed or aired and how that is presented. The balance of power shifts depending on the issues, the time, and the particular medium or company. No-one can escape for long the constraints of convention. It is this body of convention which requires careful study if we are really to understand the making of the news.

PAUL RUTHERFORD

18 *Good, Bad, or Simply Inevitable?*, pp. 27, 39, 78.