

# Media Democracy in Canada

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## WHAT IS MEDIA DEMOCRACY?

Over the last several decades corporate media have played a key role in the restructuring of capital, providing both ideological support for neo-liberal processes of deregulation and important elements in the information and communication dimensions of the emerging global economy. In this context, private corporate media have undergone centralization and concentration of ownership, while public broadcasting and alternative and community media have suffered cutbacks in funding and other forms of government support. As media have been gripped by this economic rationalization, people who have found their interests increasingly frozen out of their operations and fields of representation have been calling for reform and a restructuring of communicative resources. Concerns have been raised by a wide range of citizens' groups — such as journalists and other media workers, 'friends' of public broadcasting, library associations, unions and left of centre political parties, students, and social justice groups and activists — who all decry a narrowing of voices and shrinking diversity in media.

Taken together, these struggles can be seen as an attempt to institute media democracy. As Robert Hackett, one of Canada's foremost researchers on the subject, observes, "media democratization comprises efforts to change media messages, practices, institutions and contexts (including state communication policies), in a direction which enhances democratic values and subjectivity, as well as equal participation in societal decision making." For instance, in Canada, Media Democracy Day (see inset) activists argue that "the media must provide us with the full range of information we need to be active and responsible citizens, and that means that each of us needs the maximum possible access to the power of the media." In media democracy initiatives, media access is generally defined quite broadly and often is seen as having three dimensions: i) reform of the corporate media — that is, the introduction of measures to make the media more diverse and responsible to the population at large; ii) developing alternatives to the corporate media — that is, providing adequate funding for public broadcasters and finding ways to promote the development of independent and community media; iii) media education — whereby the purpose of education is to provide people with the tools to become more critical media consumers and to get them more involved in the media, as either critics or contributors.

Currently there is no organized or consolidated media democracy movement in Canada. However, beginning with struggles to establish public broadcasting and the CBC in the early 1930's, protests over the ownership and lack of diversity of media outlets have a long history in this country and, over the last forty years, a number of federal government committees

were struck to study these problems. For instance, in the wake of escalating concentration of ownership, the 1970 Report of the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media (Davey Committee) made a wide range of recommendations to curb further concentration and its effects. In 1978, the Report of the Royal Commission on Corporate Concentration recommended that the CRTC be empowered to prevent the cross ownership of broadcasting outlets and newspapers in the same market. And in 1981, following a sweeping review of the newspaper industry, the Royal Commission on Newspapers (Kent Commission) found that, "The structure of the industry that has now been created, that existing law and public policy have permitted, is clearly and directly contrary to the public interest." Based on these findings, Kent issued a comprehensive series of recommendations for reform. However, few of the recommendations of any of these committees were ever acted upon.

More recently, following a 1996 decision by the CRTC to change regulations that had been designed to keep newspaper, broadcasting and telecommunications companies separate, cross-media ownership deals struck during the year 2000 radically altered the Canadian mediascape. Three companies emerged out of this orgy of media mergers with commanding control of Canadian news markets: CanWest Global, Bell Globemedia, and Quebecor. (See Figure 1). Following these mergers, corporate tinkering with editorial policy and firings — particularly surrounding CanWest's takeover of the Southam newspaper chain — prompted public calls for a federal inquiry into the effects of recent consolidation.

Meanwhile, as the economic rationalization of private, profit-driven corporate media has proceeded apace, over the last 15

### Media Democracy Day

Modeled after Earth Day and celebrated each October, **Media Democracy Day** was launched in 2001 by activists in Vancouver and Toronto. The international day of action centers on three pillars of the media democracy movement: education, protest and reform. Events are organized to increase public awareness of media issues, publicize alternatives to mainstream media, and challenge the existing media system.

-*Vancouver Media Democracy Day Committee 2003*

Since 2001, Media Democracy Day has been celebrated in cities and towns across Canada and the United States as well as in Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Indonesia, Spain and the U.K..

years, the public and community media have also met with significant deregulatory pressures, resulting in cutbacks to the CBC, moves to privatize provincial broadcasters, and changes in cable regulation that cut off mandatory funding of community television. These changes too have prompted concern from a wide range of community interests.

While the federal government took no direct action to address these concerns, they did find voice in the 2003 Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (Lincoln Report) and prompted the Senate Committee on Transportation and Communications to strike an inquiry to examine the diversity and quality of news and information available to Canadians. Lincoln made a number of recommendations designed to help ensure editorial independence, control cross media ownership, bolster public broadcasting, and support community broadcasting. They have yet to be acted upon. The Senate Committee's hearings are ongoing.

### PROBLEMS FACING MEDIA DEMOCRACY

While there are a number of voices calling for change in the structure and operation of media in Canada, public pressure is fragmented at best and the policy process presents clear challenges to effecting change. The only independent organization in Canada that is actively engaged on issues of media regulation on a full time basis is the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting and, while this organization sometimes comments on issues surrounding the press, their primary focus is broadcasting. And although there are a number of groups and organizations promoting reform of print, broadcast, and web-based media in Canada, apart from unions representing journalists, they are very part time, generally voluntary efforts.

Moreover, the groups and individuals advocating reform are divided on the goals of the project. While some unions and advocacy groups call for decisive government action many journalists, editors, and journalism educators are against comprehensive regulation, citing concerns over possible government censorship. As the president of the Canadian Association of Journalists has put it, "We are not calling for government control over the editorial process. We agree that politicians have no role in deciding what journalists should publish." Consequently, there are questions about exactly what kinds of reforms key players in this struggle would support. Interventions to the Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) regarding license renewals for CTV and Global after the mergers in 2000 underscore these observations. Despite the con-

cerns raised by past public inquiries, there was a large degree of support for the mergers, particularly among industry organizations and journalism professors. Moreover, a large number of media activists – particularly those associated with social justice movements — are not involved in these reform efforts. Some are focused on building community media and its associated policy processes. Others, either informed by an anarchist sensibility or simply feeling alienated and disenfranchised, are suspicious of government and the vertical or one-way flow of communication that characterizes traditional media. Consequently, they are focused on creating their own "autonomous" media, such as Independent Media Centres.

The problems presented by this fragmented support for reform become clearer when one considers the fate of recommendations made by the Davey Committee, the Kent Commission, and the Lincoln Report. While all these inquiries provided a range of proposals to curb concentration of ownership and improve media content, given the reluctance of successive governments to push forward with reform perhaps the only way to get it on legislative and regulatory agendas is through broad and sustained public pressure. But in current circumstances such pressure does not appear to be forthcoming.

Apart from the reform of corporate media, another way of addressing concerns over media diversity is to increase the number of alternative media voices or outlets. "Alternative media" should both encompass and encourage social and political diversity. The key here is that these organizations have a mandate or purpose to serve a particular range of social groups and/or interests and that the mandate is foregrounded over the private profit motive. Ideally, the outlet is operated on a not-for profit or co-operative basis. Among the kinds of organizations that might be included under this definition are the ethnic and labour press, environmental publications, aboriginal media, and other media with a progressive social mandate. There are many print, broadcast, and web-based →

**Market Share and Cross-Ownership in Nine Local Markets, 2002**

Market	Ownership Group	Market share (%)	
		Newscasts	Dailies
Quebec	Quebecor	47.1	56.2
Toronto	Bell Globemedia	43.8	18.3
Toronto	CanWest Global	33.0	11.5
Anglophone Montreal	CanWest Global	5.0	100.0
Francophone Montreal	Quebecor	37.1	60.4
Regina	CanWest Global	28.3	100.0
Saskatoon	CanWest Global	15.3	100.0
Calgary	CanWest Global	32.2	57.8
Edmonton	CanWest Global	39.7	60.0
Vancouver	CanWest Global	70.6	100.0

Source: Centre d'études sur les médias, "Media Ownership in Canada," Report prepared for the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, 5 February 2003. (Taken from: Standing Senate Committee on Transportation and Communication. *Interim Report on the Canadian News Media*. Ottawa: Senate of Canada, 2004. p. 37.)

media organizations operating across Canada that meet with this definition. However, for the most part, because of their small size and reach, these media outlets lack economic stability. Small budgets allow for few, if any, paid workers and the size and demographics of their audiences are often unknown, making advertising and subscription sales difficult. Economic uncertainty also creates irregular publication dates and poor distribution. Moreover, there is little in the way of government support to help promote the development of these media and some of the infrastructure that did exist has been eroded over the last decade. In the larger struggle for media reform, the interests of alternative media are often sidelined or completely overshadowed by those working with issues surrounding corporate media and the CBC. Giving the concerns of the people working with these media a central place in media reform initiatives might prove a key step in helping consolidate a media democracy movement in Canada.

### WHITHER MEDIA DEMOCRACY IN CANADA?

While efforts to promote media democracy in Canada are scattered and divided, pressures to continue the economic rationalization of media are building. There are signs that the federal government is poised to ease restrictions on foreign ownership in telecommunications and, given the increasing ownership and

operational ties between telecommunications, broadcasting and newspapers, it only seems a matter of time before restrictions in these areas too will fall. While opening the floodgate to foreign investment in Canada's media seems a sure way to raise share prices, history illustrates that it will not increase the range and diversity in media. In media properties, profits are wrung from extending economies of scale and "repurposing" content created for one medium for use in another. Even a cursory review of magazine stands and television schedules illustrates that Canadian media markets are already largely extensions of their American counterparts. Further integrating these markets will not create more diversity, particularly in terms of Canadian perspectives on the world.

Given present circumstances, it is doubtful that enough pressure will be brought to bear on the federal government to stop, or even slow, the tide of deregulation engulfing Canadian media. Although resources are scarce, perhaps it is time for some of the more well-heeled advocates of media reform to take a stronger role in organizing a broad based Media Democracy movement in Canada. **R**

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## Proposals for Media Reform

Proposals for media reform generally fall in three areas: i) limit and reverse current levels of concentration of ownership in Canadian media; ii) promote diversity in corporate media ownership, as well as in the range and types of media available; iii) encourage media to meet with their social and public responsibilities. Among the measures commonly called for in Canada are:

- i) *Impose limits on ownership, particularly cross-media ownership.* Following recommendations made by a long list of public enquiries, there are calls for limits on cross-media ownership and limits on the number of media outlets one company might own in any one market. These often include calls for current owners to divest holdings to meet proposed limits.
- ii) *Ensure that the CBC/SRC and provincial public service broadcasters are guaranteed stable and adequate funding.*
- iii) *Amend the Federal Competition Act.* At present, the regulatory body that oversees the Competition Act – the Competition Bureau – only considers the impacts of media mergers on advertising markets. Reforms in this area would have the Bureau consider the impact of the consolidation on the diversity of free expression of news and ideas, as well as on advertising competition.
- iv) *Legislate a code of professional practice or code of ethics for journalists.* Giving such a code the force of law would help protect journalists and other media workers from undue influence and possible obstructions by owners.
- v) *Restructure provincial Press Councils and/or institute a National Media Commission.* In an effort to stave off more coercive forms of regulation, industry sponsored Press Councils were established in some provinces in the wake of both the Davey and Kent Commissions. However, self regulation is often seen as ineffective in terms of trying to promote fairness and balance in media coverage and there is no regulatory body at the national level.
- vi) *Right of reply legislation.* Following the lead of the British Campaign for Press and Broadcast Freedom, there has also been a call for a for some form of right of reply legislation so as to provide some form of editorial redress to persons who are misrepresented in the media.
- vii) *Establish tax incentives, production funds and other measures to encourage investment in community and alternative media.* There are myriad programs and incentives to encourage the prosperity of for-profit corporate media, but few supports for other types of media. Change here is long overdue.
- viii) *Encourage government – one of the largest advertisers in the country – to use independent and community media for their information campaigns.*