THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITY MEDIA IN CANADA

ABSTRACT

This article takes a look at the precarious state of English-minority language publications in Quebec. The unique challenges of minority language publications in the province, especially in rural communities, are enumerated along the lines of government apathy, advertising and funding constraints, competition from conglomerates, dwindling numbers of English readers and labour-intensive nature of the publication process. The article also presents the opportunities in hand for minority language publications in the form of the digital media revolution, alliance formation – with other small media groups and journalism schools, sharing of expertise and finally, the joint lobbying of the Quebec and federal governments.

Community newspapers have been chronicling the social, economic and cultural evolution of Quebec's English-speaking community for more than 150 years. They are as valuable as any archival resource in documenting the development of our communities. Woven together, community newspapers tell the story of a once vibrant English-speaking community that built an institutional network of schools, churches, hospitals and community centres, many of which have disappeared. As a historic tool, they provide first hand accounts of the formation and evolution of our communities.

Several of Quebec's minority-language papers are among the oldest newspapers in Canada and those early editions provide an instructive mirror on the social and political life of the times and continue to do so today.

The *Quebec Chronicle Telegraph* began publishing in 1764. The *Stanstead Journal*, which continues to serve the English-speaking population of the Stanstead border area, began publishing in 1845. The *Shawville Equity* in West Quebec has been around since 1883. Quebec's only other English-language daily, the *Sherbrooke Record*, was launched in 1897 and incorporated the two weeklies serving the Eastern Townships, the *Sherbrooke Examiner*, started in 1879 and the *Sherbrooke Gazette*, in 1837.

In more recent years, that core group of historic newspapers was joined by new publications responding to the need for a community newspaper to reflect their community.

In the 1970s, during a period of great political change in Quebec, a number of isolated communities saw the need for a community newspaper to link the English-speaking population, dispersed in small pockets over a vast territory, to keep the community abreast of political and social changes that would affect them. Two such papers that stemmed from that need to be united and informed were the *Gaspe SPEC* and the Magdalen Islands *First Informer*. Those papers and several others that appeared around the same time have had an immeasurable impact on defining the community.

I speak of 'community' here, which is not just a collection of people who speak English, but a group of people with a shared history and future together.

While access to English media is not an issue for English-speaking Quebecers, as is the case with the French-language minority outside Quebec, content of major

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English media is rarely relevant to the English-speaking community off the Island of Montreal. For that reason, the presence of community newspapers that reflect the concerns and aspirations of the English-speaking community is vital, particularly in remote areas where the local newspaper is the primary source of news and information.

A study done by the Centre Saint-Pierre in 1999 for Quebec's ministry of culture and communications found that an astonishing 75.9 per cent received a community newspaper, and that rate rose to 94.7 in smaller communities.

The survival and longevity of Quebec's minority language media can be attributed to the ability of papers to reinvent themselves in the face of massive changes which have kept owners and publishers in a perpetual state of flux.

Changes in the marketplace forced publishers to adapt or die.

The proliferation of French-language weeklies in virtually every community in Quebec in the 1970s changed the playing field dramatically for English media. The once small but mighty subscriber-based newspapers, which were the hallmark of English-language community newspapers, found themselves competing with free distribution papers that blanketed their readership area – some of them providing several pages of English content. Small independent publishers, who barely eked out a living, were suddenly toe-to-toe with large conglomerates with deep pockets that owned several newspapers in a publishing area.

The sudden presence of French-language weeklies delivered free of charge to homes, coincided with a declining minority population, higher levels of bilingualism among Quebec's English-speaking population, and a growing trend towards television, creating stiff competition for both readers and advertisers.

Many English publishers responded by abandoning their subscription base and going free distribution. But with a readership representing only 10 per cent of the population, it meant strategically selecting distribution areas where there was a concentrated minority population, otherwise it would require 50,000 copies to reach 5,000 readers.

Other papers met their competition by adding French pages and becoming bilingual publications.

Changes in technology have been constant from the very beginning as the industry evolved, but never moreso than in the last 20 years.

Not only did technology change the way newspapers were produced, it gave consumers a number of electronic alternatives to newspapers that fit with their fast-paced lifestyle.

For minority language newspapers struggling to survive in an increasingly competitive marketplace, the introduction of the Internet and desktop publishing also provided new opportunities.

For remote, rural based newspapers which didn't have access to libraries, university or government sources, the Internet meant editors and reporters for the first time had direct access to research material. Desktop publishing also meant increased productivity and efficiency in the newsroom and a greater opportunity for resource sharing among minority language papers across the province. For example, in the 1980s the Quebec Community Newspapers Association used a government grant to provide member papers with modems so that federal government advertising could be transmitted electronically through a one-order, one bill clearing house system established by the association. The association also engaged a freelance reporter based in Quebec City to transmit news from the National Assembly to papers throughout the province.

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Demographic changes continue to plague papers. The declining number of English-speakers in the province continues to be a major obstacle. At our paper, we all mourn when we read the obituary page, because we know when this generation of older anglos is gone, unless there is some miraculous intervention, the paper will require another reincarnation to survive. Attracting and retaining new readers is a challenge for all newspapers, regardless of size or language, but moreso for a minority publication which must also contend with readers at one end dying, and at the other end, leaving the province.

Distribution of a minority paper requires creativity, an in-depth knowledge of the community and a lot of money.

Unlike majority-language publications that have well-defined geographic borders, the minority community is dispersed in small pockets over a

vast territory. For example, The Gaspe weekly *SPEC* must distribute over a territory of hundreds of kilometers of coastline – and not all of it in a straight line.

Until recently, most papers were totally dependent on Canada Post to deliver their papers. There were few alternatives to combat ever increasing postal rates that in turn pushed up subscription prices. Sporadic delivery resulted in subscription cancellations, and changing rules about weight combined with the labour-intensive process of labeling, bagging and delivering papers to the post office made for a testy relationship at best. Today, several alternatives exist, but delivering the paper to a widely dispersed readership remains a challenge.

When Quebecor acquired our paper, some of the brightest minds in the business descended on our tiny office and decided they would revamp the costly and cumbersome way we delivered the paper each day to our 5,000 subscribers. After all, they reasoned, if we can distribute the *Journal de Montreal* to thousands of Quebecers, we can distribute 5000 copies of *The Record*. It was somewhat of a rude awakening for them to discover there is no alternative to getting Farmer Brown his *Record* every morning other than driving it 10 kilometres down a dirt road on the 12th range. Unfortunately, they discovered it after they sold our trucks. A few years later when Hollinger acquired the paper, they sent their top distribution wizard from Ontario to streamline our costly and labour-intensive method of delivering the paper which included piggybacking where possible with local French-language dailies, bagging and delivering papers overnight to rural post offices and sending a local driver out to the woods. The wizard of Ontario returned shaking his head.

In the face of such challenges, minority papers have recognized the need to pool resources and share expertise.

In 1980, a core group of 16 paid-circulation papers formed an association under the name AQREM, the Association of Quebec Regional English Media. It later expanded to include Montreal based weeklies, free-distribution papers and specialty publications serving the minority community. Membership today stands at 32.

The Association's efforts to support minority papers have, at times, been hampered by the outdated perception that minority language papers in Quebec and their readers are a privileged minority. This is an understandable misconception since many of the papers have been around for over a century and you can turn on a radio or television in any community and hear English. But the content of major media is rarely reflective of the realities of the community off the Island of Montreal and a distinction must be made between access to language and community vitality.

The association's ability to support members through clearing house revenues from federal government advertising is restricted due to the absence of a sustained policy or commitment on the part of the government to reach the minority population through community newspapers. For example, when a freeze on government advertising was imposed during the Gomery Commission hearings, decision-makers neglected to recognize the impact such a freeze would have on minority newspapers, both in terms of advertising revenues and on the dissemination of government information to the minority community. It wasn't until the association representing French-language minority papers protested that a special commission was launched to study the impact, and the freeze was lifted.

As is frequently the case, the French-language association outside Quebec and Les Hebdos du Quebec have often been Quebec's minority language media's strongest allies on industry issues.

Virtually every community newspaper in Canada, French or English, can rely on advertising revenues from their provincial and in many cases, municipal governments. Not so for Quebec's minority-language community newspapers.

In other provinces, the provincial government supports minority language media through advertising and grant support. This is not so in Quebec. With a few exceptions for financial assistance to not-for-profit newspapers – of which there are three – Quebec's ministry of culture and communication offers no assistance to minority language media and has no coherent policy to reach the community through advertising.

So why, you may ask, do English-language newspapers continue to publish in the face of such challenges?

Because they must. As long as there is an English-language community, there will be a need and an expectation that the newspaper will be there.

When we were assessing our losses the day after *The Record* was completely destroyed by fire in 1999, I received a call from an elderly subscriber who didn't get her paper. I explained to her the paper, its presses and all of the equipment burned last night, and that everything had been lost. There

was a pause and then she asked, well, am I going to get it tomorrow?

What has remained constant for over a century is the commitment newspapers bring to the readers they serve.

If they were strictly commercial ventures, owners would probably have thrown in the towel long ago.

But they are more than a purveyor of news and events. They are the cement that unites members of a geographically dispersed minority community, a bridge between French and English-speaking neighbours, the link between past and present, and tangible evidence of the continued presence of an English-speaking population in Quebec. As long as there is a minority language newspaper out there, there is proof of daily life through its schools, churches, and community groups.

The need to inform minority language communities, particularly those living in isolated rural regions, of social, economic and political change is critical. Past editions document the centralization of services and the dismantling of rural economies, the demise of Via Rail and Canada Post in rural regions, and cuts to regional CBC bureaus. They testify to the impact of those decisions on all rural residents, but more profoundly on minority communities because many of these Crown corporations operated under Official language guidelines and were the minority's link to services. The struggle to maintain English-language services, school and hospital closures, an aging population and the exodus of caregivers, the loss of young families and its impact on schools, churches and community vitality are recorded on the pages.

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These papers give voice to men and women living in rural regions, bringing to the fore their concerns about farming, the fisheries, native and minority rights and other critical issues that centrally-located politicians can easily forget.

They document the stories of hospitals, schools, churches, rinks and community centres built with the determination and pioneer spirit of local citizens who want to improve their quality of life.

They illustrate the power of the people at a grassroots level to effect change through social action. They also facilitate understanding and provide editorial leadership on the social, political and economic issues we face.

They celebrate heroes and allow readers to share in the pride of their accomplishments.

Because of their unwavering commitment to content that reflects the people who live in their readership area, and the issues that are important to them, minority language media have carved a niche as the chief observers and commentators on the past, present and future of the community.

The real snapshot of a community is not in the numbers, or the age, or the territory; it is in the measure of social action. Groups and individuals who organize fundraisers, stage events, solicit support for one worthy cause or another. People who draw attention to a need within the community or build bridges and partnerships with others who share the same needs. They are the volunteers who help with breakfast programs, work in school libraries, and organize concerts for the sick and shut-in. They write poetry, compose music and rekindle an interest in our heritage for a new generation.

These people are the lifeblood of the community. And reading their stories in the local newspaper compels us to take time to celebrate our accomplishments, our achievements and our history.

Above all, minority language papers respond to the basic need to be reminded that someone is chronicling the concerns, celebrating the triumphs, and recording the major events of the day. In other words, entrenching the identity we hold dear because a community is a living thing, comprised of real people, constantly evolving and adapting to new realities and while the core values may remain the same, it's necessary to continually redefine ourselves.

So how will minority papers continue to survive in the face of such challenges? The answer, I think, is in forging partnerships.

For example, developing closer relationships with journalism schools across the country through internships and work opportunities would help meet the staffing needs of minority papers while providing valuable work experience in a bilingual environment to young Canadian journalists.

We must:

- Cement ties with French-language papers inside and outside Quebec to share expertise on industry issues, research and technology.
- Lobby the Quebec government to recognize its responsibility to support and communi-

cate with its minority language population.

- Continue to pressure the federal government to respond to the association's requests for funding to support minority language media, which in turn enhance community vitality.
- Emphasize the importance of community newspapers in recording the life of a community at every point in its history.
- And we have to have more fun doing it. Working for a minority language newspaper in Quebec is the best gig in town.

Only in an English language newspaper in Quebec would an editor receive this translated public notice inviting English-speaking farmers to participate in an agricultural exhibition. It arrived on the editor's desk this way:

"Any English farmers who wish to expose themselves may do so at the fairgrounds on Saturday. There was a special advisory for poultry farmers to ensure their chickens were properly inoculated. It read, "If you plan to expose your bird at the fair, please be sure it's been shot and inspected before coming."