Have the Journalists Lost Control?

BY GORDON FISHER

ABSTRACT

Newspaper owners are betting big money that they can build and maintain a franchise. It's their bet. If you were making those bets, asks the author, would you not want a say in what was being sold? But even if they do have their say, we needn't worry – it's a highly competitive field out there.

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To what extent can or should media owners intervene in their own commercial or ideological interest with respect to content?

I'd like to start with a small confession. I have always wanted to own my own newspaper. Izzy Asper always wanted only to own the newspaper in Minnedosa, Man. I wanted to own the Lethbridge Herald. Izzy has done somewhat better than me.

And I often played out in my mind how that would happen – editorial positions we would take, news issues we would cover, cartoons we would buy, pictures we would publish. And not once, not for a moment, did I plan to buy a newspaper and fade away into the background while others ran my business.

So there it is. I do believe owners have every right to direct their operations in terms of both content and ideology. I actually think that is their obligation. I don't see how they cannot. Their commercial interests are, frankly, about only one thing: Content. We are selling content. It is a commercial reality.

I am not alone in this. I actually found myself agreeing with the New Democrats at their recent leadership convention when the topic got around to newspaper ownership and content direction. Turns out they favour it. They talked of the need to produce and sell a newspaper of the left, with the views of the left.

I think that's an outstanding idea. They will face the same test we all face: the ultimate court of judgment, free people expressing free will in a free marketplace. Well, you say, what about the public service newspapers must play?

Owners, generally, are smart people. They understand the public duty and they also understand it is good business to deliver on the time-honoured traditions of the craft. They know our business case rests on our credibility.

Over the years I have worked for many owners or joint owners, (hey, even the *Toronto Star* had a piece of me at one time). I have worked for dozens of publishers and professional managers. They have ALL tried to influence what our newsrooms should be doing. In some cases they have been very direct about it: The Southam family was unequivocal on some points – particularly on those national issues surrounding Quebec and separation. Editors and/or publishers who disagreed would have been disciplined. Southam considered that to be in the public interest.

In fact, it's interesting just how much advice people like me do get. From readers, of course, from journalists we employ, of course (and from some we don't), from unions, from associations, from press councils, from business, from non-profits. EVERYONE has a view, and most feel free to express it. But, somehow, owners, and only owners, should be silent?

I once worked for Conrad Black. Make no mistake about this: he had very clear views on what kind of operations he wanted to run in his commercial and ideological interests. The *National Post* from its launch reflected the clear direction of its proprietor. He intended to change the national debate, and he spent many millions of dollars doing just that. A very small group of us worked with Mr. Black for months prior to launch, and we dealt with little ambiguity in what was being undertaken. With his money.

When I say with his money, please understand: this man and the Aspers who follow him have – and are betting – hundreds of millions of dollars that they can build and maintain a franchise. And they make that bet in a highly crowded and competitive marketplace. The Aspers have done exactly the same thing with the launch of a national newscast in the dinner hour: a bold, expensive and risky operation. It's their bet. If you were making those bets, would you not want a say – a direct say – in what was being sold?

So what happened? Well, new voices have changed the national debate. Competitors got a whole lot sharper. Hundreds of new jobs were created. Both the *National Post* and Global National have been honoured, imitated, vilified and venerated. Most interestingly; news is suddenly sexy again. Interesting even.

I should point out as well that Mr. Black also made it very clear what he thought wrong with many other newspapers he owned. And we worked together to change them. And what happened with those other newspapers? Arguably, they got better. I have to point out that *The Ottawa Citizen* was greatly energized under the direction of Mr. Mills, working with no ambiguity to the clear direction of an owner.

I don't think any of that is a bad thing. It may be risky: it is always possible that Mr. Black and now Mr. Asper will be wrong. And what would happen? Well, readers and viewers would respond as they always do: by buying other papers or turning to other channels. This is the salient point, and one I must keep returning to. Readers and viewers are not victims. They pick and they choose. The owners – the Aspers, the Thomsons, the Honderichs, the Siftons, the Blacks (David, not Conrad), the Peladeaus – will all, ultimately, face their judgment. And to expect those people to operate their business as if they were a blind trust is to suspend judgment.

Now all that said, let me add this. An owner can do only so much. I say this because I know what happens in a newsroom. It is chaos. It is a furnace of debate. It is constantly burning with a flurry of copy, pictures, illustrations, feeds from staff, freelancers, networks, wire services. It is led by editors senior and junior. Hundreds, thousands, of daily decision are taken by hordes of people, all with their own biases and baggage. Deadlines are constant, pervasive and relentless.

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Now think about trying to influence this in a direct way from – say, Winnipeg – and trying to do it over scores of newspaper and television operations, large and small, over several time zones. Think about calling Kevin Newman to dictate the lineup for tonight's national newscast. Or think about phoning the editors of 17 daily newspapers. Or the news directors of 14 local television news operations. Or (good luck) think about phoning the columnists – like Christie Blatchford or Paul Wells, with instructions for the day's column. It wouldn't work. It would be impossible. To suggest that this could be done is not only naïve; it is an insult to the integrity of every journalist working in this country.

Finally, although I have not been asked to do this, I think I must also address the issue of the Aspers. Although the name of that great Canadian family was not in the title of my seminar, it was clearly in the subtext. And even though I have just said that I do agree with the right of an owner to establish a beach-head in content, let me make it clear that the Asper family is not trying to direct the daily news operation of CanWest Publications or of Global Television News.

But even if they had, so what. You have all heard about fragmentation and multiplicity of sources. It's all true. The most odious ownership intentions would not change one facet of this great western democratic society. There is just too much free information OUT THERE and our citizens are smart enough to go get it.

Just for the record, though, what the Aspers have tried to do is rather more simple. They have set direction on key areas such as: The separation of opinion from news. The elimination of editorial bias from news stories, specific instructions concerning headlines (don't torque them); unnamed sources (don't use them); pictures (not to be used for editorial purposes or to humiliate people); get the facts, get them right, get them straight; diversity (a multiplicity of faces and sources) more total community involvement – involve and interest the young. These are the things that concern the Aspers. These are not bad things.

Finally, in a closing note, I would challenge you readers to consider this. If you want to find a bogeyman in the newsrooms of this nation, I have one for you. It is not the owners. It is not even government. (Our *Charter of Rights* takes care of that.) No, the real bogeyman is something called the union. With rare exception, all print and television newsrooms in Canada are a closed shop. You can't practice journalism unless you belong to the energy and paperworkers or auto unions of Canada. And guess what the union wants to do? It wants to establish a Code of Principles covering a standard of behaviour. *Their* standards of behaviour and of journalism, of course.

No one is talking about that. Now there's a concentration of influence to fuss about.