Have the Journalists Lost Control?

BY RUSSELL MILLS

ABSTRACT

The author examines the current Canadian newspaper landscape and suggests that the fact that many newspapers and broadcasters are in few hands is not necessarily a cause for alarm, but it is a legitimate subject of public concern. The good news, he concludes, is that (for the most part) they do not intervene in the content of their media. He also proposes five principles for responsible media ownership.

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To What Extent Can or Should Media Owners Intervene in Content?

First, let's admit that media owners unquestionably have the right to intervene in content, whether we like it or not. Under our system, the freedom of expression that is guaranteed in our constitution ultimately lies with the proprietor. In Canada owners have usually delegated much of this freedom to publishers and editors. But it is not theirs by any inherent or legal right.

The other meaning of "can" is "do they have the ability?" And, of course, they do. Technology is making it easier all the time. With the high-speed electronic connections that we have today, it would be easy for a determined owner of even a large number of media outlets to monitor and control virtually all content before it is published or broadcast. The only exception might be for fast-breaking stories. None do this, but it's certainly possible.

The second part of the question is whether media owners "should" intervene in content that might affect their own commercial or ideological interests. This is the tougher question. Why should a media owner, who has the right and the ability to control content, deliberately not do so when his interests are at stake? Why should he or she show self-restraint?

For many decades the largest newspaper companies in Canada were Southam and Thomson. I worked for both of them, Thomson for a short time and Southam for a long time. Neither company intervened in content in any significant way. In Thomson's case the company saw the newspapers as businesses and didn't much care what they printed as long as they made lots of money.

Southam, however, was committed to the independence of the newspapers. The company believed that local control was a key element in its success. Southam felt that newspapers that were controlled from afar would not have the local roots and connections with their communities that successful newspapers must have.

In the mid-1990s, Conrad Black gained control of Southam and many of the former Thomson papers. He had a somewhat different view of whether a proprietor should intervene in content.

Conrad Black had strong views on many issues and there was widespread fear among journalists that he would impose these on the newspapers. For the most part these fears were not justified. He required two of the newspapers, including the *Ottawa Citizen,* to change editors but after that initial intervention, he was largely a hands-off owner as far as content was concerned. In the four years that I ran the *Ottawa Citizen* under his ownership I did not receive a single call from him or any of his colleagues about news or editorial content. When Conrad was upset about a public issue he would send us a piece under his own byline and suggest that we consider running it on our op-ed page. Of course, we did. This only happened a few times and it seemed like a reasonable way for a proprietor with strong views to behave.

The *National Post,* of course, was different. It was started at great expense partly to inject different political views into the national debate and Conrad Black had much greater interest in its content. But those of us running the metro dailies in most of Canada's large cities could not legitimately complain about central control of our content.

This brings us up to the media ownership that we have in Canada today. When you look at newspapers alone, ownership is less concentrated now than it was when Conrad Black owned about 60 per cent of Canada's daily papers. Osprey, Transcontinental and the new owners of the Winnipeg *Free Press* add some welcome diversity to the industry. The situation is different, however, when you consider the news media in total. Canada does not ban cross ownership of media as some countries do and because of this the concentration of media ownership in Canada's big cities has increased. A few companies now control much of what Canadians see and read.

Democracies thrive on debate and different points of view and need this to remain healthy. It is the responsibility of media owners to ensure that different ideas are presented.

Much of this concentrated ownership is the result of the questionable business strategy called convergence that has yet to pay any dividends to the companies or their shareholders. In fact, it has left some companies deeply in debt.

The fact that many newspapers and broadcasters are in few hands is not necessarily a cause for alarm but it is a legitimate subject of public concern. These companies have the right, and the ability, to intervene in the content of their media for commercial or ideological reasons if they choose to do so. The good news is that, for the most part, they do not. CanWest has been somewhat of an exception. And to be fair, because of increased competition, some of Canada's news media are better than ever.

So why should media owners exercise self-restraint and not intervene in content? First I would make a distinction between different types of content and will focus on newspapers, the medium I know best. There are three essential types of content. One is news, second is the editorial board opinions presented on the editorial page and finally there are other opinions presented in columns, op-ed pieces and letters to the editor. As far as news is concerned, owners should never interfere. This is factual material and its selection and its presentation should be delegated to professional journalists. They should be permitted to operate in a climate free from pressure and strive to be as accurate and truthful as possible. The facts should not be selected based on an owner's opinions.

Several months ago, Izzy Asper, chairman of CanWest, gave a speech in Montreal in which he accused much of the world's news media of being anti-Israel in their coverage of the Middle East. Mr. Asper, of course, has every right to hold these views. Expressing them in this way, however, was questionable for a large media owner. Although his comments were not specifically directed at CanWest newspapers, how else could his editors interpret his comments except as direction on how they should to cover the Middle East conflict? Owners should take care to protect their journalists from pressure, not pile it on.

When dealing with opinion, a distinction should be drawn based on how many media outlets a proprietor owns. No one could object to the owner of a single newspaper expressing his or her views in editorials on the editorial page. That's how press freedom began. The more outlets a proprietor controls, however, the less defensible this becomes and the more restraint a proprietor should show.

Democracies thrive on debate and different points of view and need this to remain healthy. It is the responsibility of media owners to ensure that different ideas are presented. If the same editorial opinions are presented in many different newspapers, the marketplace of ideas will be damaged. Allowing this type of autonomy is the responsibility that goes along with the privilege of owning different media outlets. If an owner of many media outlets wants to express opinions, he can write periodic pieces with his own byline, as Conrad Black did, or pick one newspaper to present his own views on the editorial page and let the others go their own ways.

The strong public views of some owners, such as CanWest, may be limiting the range of opinion that is presented. Editors selecting opinion pieces and letters should not have to worry about the owner's opinions. Their only concern should be keeping the public informed. All owners, whether they own a single medium or many, have an obligation to present the widest possible range of opinions in columns, op-ed pieces and letters to the editor. Priority should be given to letters criticizing the newspaper or challenging its editorial opinions. This supports the marketplace of ideas and is simply a matter of good journalistic practice.

It is worrisome that CanWest appears to be centralizing control of its news media. This could ultimately affect the range of content that is provided. A new Canadian News Desk is being established at the company's head office in Winnipeg to supply national news to the company's newspapers. This has led to fears that local news staffs and budgets will be cut. The most recent development is that the company is retiring the title of "publisher". Newspapers in future will be run by "general managers", who will likely have less autonomy than their predecessors and less control over what the subscribers in their communities get to read.

The question we are answering also drew a distinction between commercial and ideological matters. A responsible owner should never use his news media to push his own commercial interests. That would be a betrayal of the responsibility to the community to be a disinterested source of fact and opinion. One complication today is that since converged media companies require licenses from government to operate their broadcasting businesses, they may believe that staying on the good side of government is necessary. If so, commercial interests have the potential to affect coverage of politics and government.

It is often said that the news media are a public trust in private hands. This has become a cliché, but like most clichés, it contains some truth. How should the public expect media companies to exercise this great public responsibility? When the Senate of Canada gets around to holding its planned hearings on the state of the Canada media, following are some principles for good media ownership that Senators might wish to consider and put to media proprietors.

First, the primary dedication of good media companies must be to the pursuit of truth on behalf of their readers and viewers. When the pursuit of truth conflicts with business imperatives, truth must prevail.

Second, the primary allegiance of good media companies must be to the citizens of their communities; not to shareholders, advertisers or employees. Keeping the citizens of a democracy informed with facts and opinions is a solemn responsibility that must not take second place to any other claim.

Third, good media companies must fiercely protect the independence of their editors and other journalists. By independence, I mean freedom from pressure of any sort, from government, advertisers and corporate interests. Truth can only be pursued successfully in a climate free from pressure.

Fourth, good media companies must ensure that their media have sufficient resources to cover and reflect their communities. Good journalism requires time for reflection and investigation and, while it can be done efficiently, it cannot be done on the cheap.

Finally, executives of good media companies and their journalists must live the values of truth, independence and commitment to their communities in their own business and personal lives. The news media can only hold elected officials and others with power to high standards if their own proprietors, managers and staffs meet the same standard of integrity.

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BY LAWRENCE SURTEES

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ABSTRACT

Proponents of multimedia convergence are now fond of declaring that content is king. But is it really? Sound business sense suggests that major media carriers would perform better if left free of the constraints of cross-ownership. That might be what's happening.

Convergence & the News Room: Some Myths and Realities

Billy Holiday sang the lyrics, "Thems that gots shall gets… But it still is news… And God bless the child who's got his own."

That song should be renamed because it seems to be about media convergence! I'd like to make several points, both as a communications industry researcher and former journalist who spent 17 years at *The Globe & Mail* – or, as we now call it, *The Bell News – national edition*. I want to briefly address a few myths about convergence and point out some interesting historical vignettes before offering my perspective on the realities of the converged newsroom.

My first key message is that these so-called convergence deals are really a new form of cross-ownership. Media cross ownership has been confused with convergence by their 'New Media' owners. Since media convergence is a misnomer, de-convergence should come as little surprise.

Second – history teaches us why there are many reasons to be skeptical of New Media cross-ownership deals.

And third, cross-ownership does affect newsrooms and has led to negative impact on news coverage, diversity of opinions – and led to killed stories or distorted coverage. But it always has, so, again, what's new? The question we should ask as a democratic society is, "What model of ownership best promotes a plurality of contending views and opinions?"

Let me first address the question. Why the confusion about the term *convergence*?

How many know that the notion of convergence is actually Canadian-coined? It was explored in this groundbreaking report, titled *Instant World*, published by the