What Have We Learned?

BY CHRISTOPHER DORNAN

ABSTRACT

Sometimes the decisions of media executives are strongly tied to economic considerations. That is not new. But in a spirited examination of the state of Canada's media, we have come to know far more about policy and regulation than about the impact of market forces on content.

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Safe to say that whatever one might think about the state of the media in Canada, the state of debate on the media in Canada is vigorous and healthy. At the February conference we heard articulate voices argue that the apparatus of media regulation of the media is now intrusive, counter-productive and unnecessary. We heard equally articulate voices argue that regulation is more necessary than ever. We heard that traditions of public broadcasting have outlived their usefulness. We heard that traditions of public broadcasting have outlived their usefulness. We heard that public broadcasting has never been more essential. We heard that consolidation of corporate control over communication and concentration of media ownership is a clear and present danger to the public interest. We heard that media offerings have never been so diverse and that concentration of ownership is in fact much less of a factor that it was, say 22 years ago when the Kent Commission delivered its reports.

A leitmotif running through the conference – not the only one by any means, but a prominent one – was the debate between those who express a confidence in a media system propelled by free market, private sector imperatives, and those who argue for some sort of countervailing regime that would compensate for market imperatives, complement them, or constrain them.

In that light, what struck me about the conference proceedings is actually how little we know about the concrete ways in which market considerations influence the specific forms and content of media products. The realms of policy and regulation – and the decisions of regulators and policy makers – are very much the objects of analysis and scrutiny, and they are comparatively visible. The CRTC must explain itself. The CBC must explain itself. The ministries of Heritage and Industry must explain themselves. So, for example, when the CRTC licences a country and western station in Toronto over an application for a black music station, one may disagree with the decision but at least the reasons for it are made plain.

By contrast, inasmuch as the market determines media conduct and content, it does so without explaining itself. I agree with Andrew Coyne, who said that we tend to talk about the market as though

it's some sort of disembodied force. But in fact the market influences media content through decisions taken by media executives in light of commercial pressures – that is, under specific circumstances – and there is nothing necessarily inevitable about them. Market conditions change over time, and sometimes the decisions of media executives are eminently subject to contestation purely on economic grounds.

Let me give you a couple of examples to explain what I mean. First, the way in which market conditions can change with profound consequences for the overall media economy, the public interest and policy makers. Take the attention of the news media to science. Twenty years ago, mass circulation dailies such as the *Montreal Gazette* or the *Calgary Herald* paid relatively little attention to scientific research. These papers would have weekly sections devoted to travel, cars, real estate, but they wouldn't have equivalent sections devoted to science. Why not? Because there was no commercial incentive to do so. Because, unlike travel and automobiles and the housing market, there was no ready or obvious advertising constituency that would support robust coverage of science. So it fell to public sector enterprises such as the CBC to cover science, or to upscale newspapers such as the *Globe & Mail*, which signalled its distinction from its more populist competitors precisely through content such as dutiful attention to science.

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In such circumstances, the place of an institution such as the CBC was secure – or, at least, its self-understanding was assured. It knew that it existed to provide what the private sector either would not or could not: programs devoted to science (*The Nature of Things*), to fate and spirituality (*Man Alive*), children's programming devoid of commercial interest.

Flash forward 20 years and now we have entire channels devoted to science, and to faith and spirituality, and to children's programming – all perfectly profitable, good quality, and available 24 hours a day. Hence the CBC's existential crisis, born of shifting realities in the media marketplace.

Let me offer another example. Twenty years ago, what were then the member Southam daily newspapers relied for their coverage of parliamentary affairs on Southam News – the chain's in-house Ottawa bureau – on Canadian Press, and on their own correspondents. Each paper would maintain its own Ottawa reporter, attuned to how deliberations in Ottawa would affect regional concerns. Over the course of the past two decades, however, in response to declining newsroom budgets and the need to pare expenses, one by one almost all the Southam papers dropped their own parliamentary reporters. That was a decision taken by media executives in light of commercial pressures. At the same time, however, to this day each of the Southam papers – or what were the Southam papers – maintains its own movies critic; each of these people reviews exactly the same movies at exactly the same time, almost all these movies are American releases, and the work of these movie critics is conducted in an environment in which there is certainly no shortage of media attention to new releases, from Entertainment Weekly to Rotten Tomatoes.com to Ebert and Roeper. So it's just the lesser ironies of the overall scheme that reporting on national political affairs is relegated to pool coverage, while Hollywood rates a private scribe at every daily newspaper in the CanWest chain. There is nothing natural and inevitable about that. The *New Yorker* only has two movies critics, why does CanWest require 13? It's the result of decisions taken in corporate suites, but it need not be that way.

So, I would argue, in light of what we heard at the conference, that what is needed is greater attention to the ways in which market considerations are inflected through the decisions of media producers to colour or indeed determine the media content that is actually made available to viewers and readers and web clickers. All the more poignant given that as we have heard in the two days of discussions, the economic underpinnings of the media are very much in flux. The same seamless marriage between news, comment and advertising that obtains in print and broadcasting has not yet been effected in the case of the Internet – and the economic model that emerges in cyberspace may be quite distinct from what we're familiar with in the case of the traditional media – but the payment model or models that emerge with have profound consequence for the type of content we get. Similarly, Ian MacLean of Media Experts may be right in that "the Personal Video Recorder may not be the death knell of advertiser-supported broadcasting, but I think it is plain that shifts in the relation between advertising and content will have profound consequences for media content."

And on that note, let me finish by pointing to something that I don't think was explicitly mentioned during the proceedings, but I suspect may be momentous for the oldest of the traditional media, the newspapers – and that is changes in classified advertising. The classifieds, as we all know, are the bread and butter of the newspaper industry. It's an ad market that amounts to some $900 million per year, and it's a form of advertising that cannot be accommodated in radio, television or magazines. Heretofore, it's been the exclusive preserve of the newspapers, and they pay the freight for those newsrooms full of print journalists across the country. But classifieds are superbly suited to the Internet. Indeed, web classifieds are in principle infinitely superior to newspaper classified. So what happens to the newspaper industry when classified can be unhitched from the paper-and-ink product of the daily paper? What happens when it's splitsville for the seamless marriage between editorial content and the largest single source of revenue for the newspaper as we know it?