

# Fast Facts:

## Local Implications of Corporate Media Concentration

*Peter Hudson*

In 1981, the Kent Commission Report cautioned Canadians “in a country that has allowed so many newspapers to be owned by a few conglomerates, freedom of the press means, in itself, only that enormous influence without responsibility is conferred on a handful of people.” (Kent 1981: 217).

The concentration of media about which the Commission reported has accelerated, resulting in the emergence of the ‘multi-media conglomerate’. One example is Quebecor Media Inc. (QMI). QMI owns or controls Videotron (a cable TV and internet provider), Sun Media which operates 46 newspapers including 9 major dailies such as the Sun chain, Group TVA (19 broadcasting stations), Sun News TV and an assortment of video, publishing, and film operations.

The concentration of power in fewer and fewer hands is compounded by the links with our political systems where there are some international parallels. In the U.K., James Murdoch, scion of the Murdoch media empire, is a frequent podium companion of Conservative P.M. David Cameron. Andy Coulson, then editor of Murdoch’s News of the World, entered Cameron’s service in 2007, becoming Cameron’s Press Secretary when the Conservatives won the 2009 election. In Canada, Kory Teneyke was an advisor to Preston Manning and Mike Harris until July 2008 when he became Stephen Harper’s Director of Communications. In July of 2009, he left in order to set up QMI’s Sun News TV station. When he resigned, he was replaced by Luc Lavoie who was a senior aide to former P.M. Brian Mulroney who is currently a Director of QMI.

These questionable relationships become further problematic evidenced by clear abuses of power. For example, in the U.K. Andy Coulson has been charged in a phone hacking scandal; in Canada, Stephen Harper was seen to be supporting his former Press Secretary in Quebecor’s bid to establish Sun TV News while during the process, Teneyke lied about the nature of the category that QMI was seeking from the CRTC. He was also guilty of engineering false signatures in order to discredit a petition opposing the application.

In Manitoba, the Kent Commission’s warning about the danger of media concentration is evident in QMI’s ownership of the Winnipeg Sun. QMI’s Pierre Karl Peladeau, who earns an approximate \$4.8 million annually, has locked out various staff no fewer than 10 times, unabashedly uses his media empire to rail against the power of unions, and admits to having no interest in balanced reporting, claiming a “small-c conservative” bias.

Fourteen consecutive pre-election issues in the *Winnipeg Sun* were examined for the frequency of the promotion of the core of the neo-liberal ideology, which promotes smaller government and the meeting of human need exclusively through the private sector. The ideology denigrates public services, represents taxation as inherently evil, exaggerates problems such as public debt (as a reason to cut public services,) and blames unions for distorting the operation of the free market. Expenditures on measures, which “get tough” on crime and the military are exceptions to the ideology’s general dislike of public services and taxation.

In the 14 issues of the *Sun* examined, there were 9 lengthy pieces devoted to promoting tax cuts and/or exposure of “scandalous” public expenditures. There were twelve pieces criticizing public services and institutions in general, extending to 17 if gratuitous shots at the CBC are included. There were 5 pieces overtly critical of unions, one of which consumed the entire front page with a scurrilous 3-inch headline.

Getting tough on crime commanded the attention of no fewer than 17 articles. There were 39 praising the military, some boosting Sun TV presented as news, some in praise of the Federal Conservatives, and a couple downplaying the environment as a major issue. There were 13 articles highly critical of the Federal NDP. The count also revealed 19 pieces which seem to present an opposing viewpoint, but of these, 13 were letters to the editor, which were all rebutted by the editor. Four other pieces were Jack Layton obituaries, leaving only 2 pieces that can be placed in the opposite ideological camp.

Early Manitoba election coverage has treated the New Democrats as incompetent ideologues, with no attempt at balance. The most outrageous example was a front page dedicated to the depiction of NDP leader Greg Selinger clad in a barrel with a two-inch headline that read, “It’s the economy stupid”. None of these front-page attacks referred to a news item, but to opinion pieces. The opposition parties received unquestioned matter-of-fact reporting.

The *Sun* has also made much of a “bloated” civil service in Manitoba. No attempt has been made to discuss whether or not such “bloaters” were providing some useful service in health, education and a host of other things we value. Moreover, the *Sun* was inaccurate in claiming that Manitoba was last among the provinces in

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the “bloater league table.”

The final evidence of bias concerns some of the major sources of opinion. One is the Frontier Centre, the mandate of which is to promote the expansion of the private sector at the expense of the public sector. It enjoys a regular Winnipeg *Sun* column as well as being frequently cited. Another is the Taxpayer’s Association, which promotes an ideology of tax cutting and small government. During the recent Federal election its spokesperson was pro-

moted to political commentator. He continues to be frequently cited. These people are lobbyists, not journalists.

Given Peladeau’s admission of bias, the content analysis of the *Winnipeg Sun*, and the ink allocated to lobbyists, the conclusion is that the paper is dedicated to the dissemination of propaganda defined as “(presenting) information primarily to influence an audience” ... “Propaganda is often biased, with facts selectively presented... to further a political or other type of agenda.”

It is even more disturbing that this propaganda is widely distributed gratis. In Winnipeg, the *Sun* is made available free of charge at Robin’s Doughnuts franchises, on Winnipeg Transit buses and other locations across the city. The source of this largess is The Peak of the Market, a Manitoba growers co-op established to market the members’ produce. The extent to which the *Sun*, along with the Peak of the Market’s charity, is successful in “furthering a political agenda”, such as influencing the pending provincial election, is unknown. But the persistent attempt is a frightening abuse of privilege, realizing the worst predictions of the Kent Commission.

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