

Newspaper Ownership and the News

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In a recent poll of Canadian print journalists, over one half stated that newspaper owners' views and beliefs are evident in the nature and content of news pages. This may come as a surprise, particularly to the majority of us who have believed that – for the most part at least – the news is just the news.

In spite of the widespread recognition that the mass media play a critical role in public affairs, Canadians have spent little time considering how exactly the news is produced. In particular, we have devoted little attention to the influence that ownership of news media may have on the stories we read, watch or hear every day.

Asking journalists' opinions is one particularly fruitful line of inquiry. They are the ones that write the news, after all. Are journalists opposed to or in favour of the concentration of media ownership? Do they feel that their work is affected by the ownership of their newspaper? Answering these questions represents one critical step in what we believe should be an increasing awareness of the issues surrounding media content and ownership in Canada.

Earlier this year, we sent a mail-out survey to the newsroom employees of nine major Canadian newspapers. 361 were returned, well distributed across each of the newspapers. The resulting sample includes 171 reporters, 45 columnists/opinion writers, 61 copy-editors, 60 editors/managers, and 24 others. This survey provides a good opportunity to discover journalists' views about the state of Canadian newspapers.

What do the results show? Journalists' opinions regarding the concentration of newspaper ownership are quite clear. A vast proportion believe that greater concentration of newspaper ownership decreases the quality of newspaper content (86%) and decreases the public credibility of newspapers (95%). These results are striking, particularly when compared with results of an Environics survey released earlier this week. Only 57% of Canadians believe that the increasing concentration of media ownership in Canada represents an adverse development. In light of journalists' opinions on the matter, we should perhaps be more concerned.

But what exactly should we be concerned about? Greater concentration of ownership is not in and of itself a bad thing. One can imagine a single individual owning all the newspapers in Canada, and leaving it to a diverse group of editors to freely determine news content and commentary. Indeed, there are media conglomerates in Canada – past and present – that are known for exactly this. However, the situation may become problematic if the views and interests of a limited number of owners' regularly affect newspaper content.

From journalists' perspective, the issue largely centres on the division between editorials and news coverage. When asked whether the owner(s) of their newspaper have views and interests they would like to see expressed in it, 92% of journalists answered positively. This is no surprise, of course – owners are certainly welcome to have views, and it is entirely natural

that they would like to see these views expressed in their newspaper(s). But journalists suggest that owners' views and interests should not affect the way in which news stories are reported. Approximately four out of ten journalists (41%) believe owners' views should be reflected in editorials, but only one in twenty (5%) thinks they should influence news coverage. The news, journalists suggest, should be as unbiased and informative as possible.

Should Canadians be concerned about the pervasiveness of owners' views on the news pages? We asked journalists "Would you say that the owner's views and interests are regularly reflected in editorials?" and asked the same question about news coverage. Unsurprisingly, a clear majority (76%) says that the opinions of owners have a frequent impact on the content of editorials. But a substantial proportion (56%) also feels that news stories often reflect the owners' views and interests. This may be cause for concern: one journalist in twenty believes owners' views *should* affect news coverage, but more than one in five believes they *do*.

These single values conceal considerable variation across newspapers. Comparatively few journalists at the francophone newspapers in our sample believe ownership affects news content at their papers (*La Presse*, 16%; *Le Devoir*, 31%; *Le Journal de Montreal*, 43%). Similarly, a minority of journalists at the *Globe and Mail* (39 per cent) and the *National Post* (44 per cent) believe owners' views influence news content. Scores for other newspapers are higher (*Ottawa Citizen*, 67%; *Toronto Star*, 71%; *Montreal Gazette*, 76%; *Vancouver Sun*, 83%). Most journalists at these papers think that owners' views and interests regularly influence the content of news pages.

These results might lead one to question whether the news we receive is sufficiently unbiased, particularly given the limited number of newspaper owners in Canada. That we should be concerned about news content may *only* be due to the small number of newspaper owners, in fact. A large and diverse collection of owners whose interests are reflected in news coverage may not be a bad thing – a diversity of viewpoints can at least exist across newspapers. We should be concerned, however, when a limited number of people own most major Canadian newspapers, and some of these individuals assert control not just over editorials but more generally over the type and nature of news Canadians receive.

It is evident that most journalists are concerned about the concentration of newspaper ownership, and that a considerable number believe that owners' views and interests extend beyond the editorial pages. We encourage Canadians to be more aware of the issues relating to media ownership in Canada. We can no longer continue to believe that the news is just the news. The ownership of Canadian newspapers is not a simple issue, and our poll is certainly not the last word on the matter. But it will be a measure of the health of our media if it can bring the same degree of critical scrutiny to its own conduct as it does to that of other important Canadian institutions.

The survey on which this article is based was conducted under the auspices of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. The Institute is hosting a conference in Montreal, from February 13th to 15th, entitled "Who Controls Canada's Media?"

Newspapers in Canada Pilot Study

Newsire – February 11th 2003

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We are pleased to announce the results of a national survey of journalists concerning their views on newspaper ownership. The survey was conducted in conjunction with the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, whose conference entitled “Who Controls Canada’s Media?” takes place at the Montreal Omni Hotel from February 13th to 15th 2003.

During the month of January 2003, we mailed a one-page survey to approximately 1000 journalists working at 9 major newspapers across the country. Over 360 completed surveys were returned to us. Our sample contains a substantial contingent of respondents from each of the 9 newspapers (see Table 1), and across a variety of newsroom jobs (see Table 2).

Table 1. “Which newspaper do you work for?”

	Freq.	Percent
Le Devoir	16	4.46
Montreal Gazette	59	16.43
Ottawa Citizen	46	12.81
Globe and Mail	51	14.21
National Post	27	7.52
Toronto Star	55	15.32
Journal de Montreal	21	5.85
La Presse	44	12.26
Vancouver Sun	40	11.14
Total	359	100.00

Table 2. “Are you a ...?”

	Freq.	Percent
reporter	171	47.37
columnist/opinion	45	12.47
copy-editor	61	16.90
editor/manager	60	16.62
other	24	6.65
Total	361	100.00

We provide results for most of the questions included in the survey below. Results are broken down by newspaper, although there are significant differences across newspapers in only a few cases.

Our results are as follows:

Almost all journalists (92%) believe the owners of their newspaper have views and interests they would like to see expressed in the paper (see Table 3). This proportion varies little across newspapers.

Table 3. "Do you think the owner(s) of your newspaper have views and interests they would like to see expressed in it?" (yes or no)

	Freq.	% saying yes
Le Devoir	16	68.7%
Montreal Gazette	59	98.3%
Ottawa Citizen	46	97.8%
Globe and Mail	50	72.0%
National Post	27	100.0%
Toronto Star	54	94.4%
Journal de Montreal	21	81.0%
La Presse	43	95.3%
Vancouver Sun	40	100.0%
	356	91.6%

More importantly, the overwhelming majority (83%) says that their owners' views and interests are regularly reflected in the content of their newspaper (see Table 4a). Significant differences of opinion can be found across the enterprises. The lowest level of agreement is found at the Globe and Mail (50%), while about two-thirds share this opinion at La Presse (67%) and Le Journal de Montréal (71%). The proportion stating that owners' standpoints are regularly presented in their newspaper tops 90% at the Montreal Gazette, the Ottawa Citizen, the National Post, the Toronto Star, and the Vancouver Sun.

Table 4. "Do you think the owner's views and interests are regularly reflected in the content of your newspaper?" (yes or no)

	Freq.	% saying yes
Le Devoir	16	81.2%
Montreal Gazette	56	98.2%
Ottawa Citizen	46	95.7%
Globe and Mail	50	50.0%
National Post	26	96.1%
Toronto Star	53	90.6%
Journal de Montreal	21	66.7%
La Presse	41	70.7%
Vancouver Sun	39	94.9%
	348	83.3%

Furthermore, we asked people who think their newspaper's content often reflects the owners' views and interests about the location of these influences. It is not surprising to find that journalists massively (76%) believe that editorials are frequent vehicles for ownership (see Table

5). However, it is quite startling to see that over one half of journalists (56%) considers that news coverage generally portrays the positions of ownership (see Table 6).

Table 5. "If you answered yes, would you say that the owner's views and interests are regularly reflected in editorials?" (yes or no)

	Freq.	% saying yes
Le Devoir	16	81.3%
Montreal Gazette	59	96.6%
Ottawa Citizen	46	91.3%
Globe and Mail	51	35.3%
National Post	27	88.9%
Toronto Star	55	89.1%
Journal de Montreal	21	19.0%
La Presse	44	72.7%
Vancouver Sun	40	85.0%
	359	76.0%

Table 6. "If you answered yes, would you say that the owner's views and interests are regularly reflected in news coverage?" (yes or no)

	Freq.	% saying yes
Le Devoir	16	31.3%
Montreal Gazette	59	76.3%
Ottawa Citizen	46	67.4%
Globe and Mail	51	39.2%
National Post	27	44.4%
Toronto Star	55	70.9%
Journal de Montreal	21	42.9%
La Presse	44	15.9%
Vancouver Sun	40	82.5%
	359	56.0%

Do journalists think that it is legitimate for the views and interests of the owners to be reflected in their newspaper's content? About 60% of journalists (including 65% of reporters) respond that newspapers should not disseminate ownership's views and interests (see Table 7) in any way. There are only three newspapers where a plurality supports the presence of ownership's points of view: the National Post, the Ottawa Citizen and the Toronto Star.

Table 7. "In principle, do you think the owner's views and interests should be regularly reflected in the content of their newspaper?" (yes or no)

	Freq.	% saying yes
Le Devoir	16	37.5%
Montreal Gazette	57	43.9%
Ottawa Citizen	44	56.8%
Globe and Mail	48	29.2%
National Post	25	56.0%
Toronto Star	52	51.9%

Journal de Montreal	21	14.3%
La Presse	42	28.6%
Vancouver Sun	38	34.2%

	345	40.5%

41% of respondents consider that editorials should regularly reflect ownership positions (see Table 8), only 5% deem that news coverage constitutes a legitimate channel (see Table 9).

Table 8. "If you answered yes, would you say that the owner's views and interests should be regularly reflected in editorials?" (yes or no)

	Freq.	% saying yes

Le Devoir	16	37.5%
Montreal Gazette	59	40.7%
Ottawa Citizen	46	56.5%
Globe and Mail	51	31.4%
National Post	27	55.6%
Toronto Star	55	54.5%
Journal de Montreal	21	19.0%
La Presse	44	29.5%
Vancouver Sun	40	35.0%

	359	41.2%

Table 9. "If you answered yes, would you say that the owner's views and interests should be regularly reflected in news coverage?" (yes or no)

	Freq.	% saying yes

Le Devoir	16	0.0%
Montreal Gazette	59	8.5%
Ottawa Citizen	46	2.2%
Globe and Mail	51	7.8%
National Post	27	0.0%
Toronto Star	55	9.1%
Journal de Montreal	21	4.8%
La Presse	44	0.0%
Vancouver Sun	40	7.5%

	359	5.3%

When we ask journalists whether their own work is affected by the views and interests of the owners, we basically get a 50/50 split. About half the journalists say that ownership rarely has an impact (none or some of the time) on what they write or edit (49%) and on the issues and point of views they are able to raise and pursue (49%). Respondents falling into this category or more numerous at Le Devoir, the National Post, the Ottawa Citizen, and La Presse. The other half of journalists feels that the impact of ownership is more frequent (most of the time or almost always) on both dimensions of their work (51% and 52% respectively). Such responses were more common at Le Journal de Montréal, the Montreal Gazette, the Toronto Star, and the Vancouver Sun. Journalists from the Globe and Mail fell in the middle ground.

Table 10. "What about your own work? How much of the time do you feel that the owner's views and interests have an impact on what you write or edit?" (none of the time, some of the time, most of the time, almost all the time)

	Percent of respondents saying...				Freq.
	none of t	some of t	most of t	almost al	
Le Devoir	68.75%	12.50%	18.75%	0.00%	16
Montreal Gazette	28.57%	5.36%	57.14%	8.93%	56
Ottawa Citizen	54.55%	4.55%	38.64%	2.27%	44
Globe and Mail	39.22%	7.84%	50.98%	1.96%	51
National Post	51.85%	11.11%	37.04%	0.00%	27
Toronto Star	32.73%	3.64%	63.64%	0.00%	55
Journal de Montreal	38.10%	0.00%	61.90%	0.00%	21
La Presse	68.18%	0.00%	31.82%	0.00%	44
Vancouver Sun	32.50%	7.50%	45.00%	15.00%	40
Total	43.50%	5.37%	47.46%	3.67%	354

Table 11. "What about your own work? How much of the time do you feel that the owner's views and interests have an impact on the issues and point of views you are able to raise and pursue?" (none of the time, some of the time, most of the time, almost all the time)

	Percent of respondents saying...				Freq
	none of t	some of t	most of t	almost al	
Le Devoir	46.67%	6.67%	40.00%	6.67%	15
Montreal Gazette	30.36%	7.14%	50.00%	12.50%	56
Ottawa Citizen	42.86%	7.14%	45.24%	4.76%	42
Globe and Mail	54.90%	5.88%	33.33%	5.88%	51
National Post	44.44%	7.41%	40.74%	7.41%	27
Toronto Star	36.54%	5.77%	57.69%	0.00%	52
Journal de Montreal	33.33%	4.76%	61.90%	0.00%	21
La Presse	61.36%	2.27%	36.36%	0.00%	44
Vancouver Sun	33.33%	8.33%	44.44%	13.89%	36
Total	42.73%	6.10%	45.35%	5.81%	344

Journalist opinion regarding two recent trends in newspaper ownership is quite clear. A vast proportion thinks that greater concentration of newspaper ownership decreases the quality of newspaper content (87%) and decreases the public credibility of newspapers (95%). This pattern is consistent across all newspapers.

Table 12. "Do you think that greater newspaper ownership concentration increases or reduces the quality of newspaper content?" (increases quality or decreases quality)

	Freq.	% saying decreases quality
Le Devoir	15	86.7%
Montreal Gazette	51	94.1%
Ottawa Citizen	42	92.9%

Globe and Mail	42	92.9%
National Post	22	72.7%
Toronto Star	53	94.3%
Journal de Montreal	21	85.7%
La Presse	35	57.1%
Vancouver Sun	36	86.1%

	317	86.4%

Table 13. "Do you think that greater newspaper ownership concentration increases or reduces the public credibility of newspapers?" (increases credibility or decreases credibility)

	Freq.	% saying decreases credibility
Le Devoir	16	100.0%
Montreal Gazette	52	96.2%
Ottawa Citizen	44	100.0%
Globe and Mail	46	95.7%
National Post	25	100.0%
Toronto Star	53	94.3%
Journal de Montreal	21	90.5%
La Presse	39	84.6%
Vancouver Sun	37	94.6%

	333	94.9%

Nearly all journalist also believe that greater media ownership convergence decreases the quality of newspaper content (89%) and decreases the public credibility of newspapers (94%) (see Tables 14 and 15). Again, not much variation is uncovered among the nine papers on this issue.

Table 14. "Do you think that greater media ownership convergence (i.e., a single company owning both newspapers and television stations) increases or reduces the quality of newspaper content?" (increases quality or decreases quality)

	Freq.	% saying decreases quality
Le Devoir	15	100.0%
Montreal Gazette	51	96.1%
Ottawa Citizen	40	92.5%
Globe and Mail	44	77.3%
National Post	19	78.9%
Toronto Star	50	96.0%
Journal de Montreal	21	81.0%
La Presse	38	81.6%
Vancouver Sun	38	94.7%

	315	88.6%

Table 15. "Do you think that greater media ownership convergence (i.e., a single company owning both newspapers and television stations) increases or reduces the public credibility of newspapers?" (increases credibility or decreases credibility)

	Freq.	% saying decreases credibility
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Le Devoir		16	100.0%
Montreal Gazette		52	98.1%
Ottawa Citizen		40	97.5%
Globe and Mail		44	79.5%
National Post		21	95.2%
Toronto Star		52	90.4%
Journal de Montreal		21	95.2%
La Presse		41	95.1%
Vancouver Sun		38	97.4%
		325	93.5%
