

The Death of Canadian Journalism

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CanWest CEO Leonard Asper. PHOTO: Reuters.

In a crowded bar in downtown Vancouver, a group of reporters from the city's main daily newspaper, *The Vancouver Sun*, gather after work to do what most people revel in after a long week at the office: bitch about the boss. While images of the Iraq War, Wal-Mart and Kid Rock quickly flash and disappear on the television screens above them, editors are mocked, columnists are ridiculed and the paper their bylines appear in is panned up and down.

There's nothing too radical about most of their complaints – it's no secret to anyone in the city that the Sun is a dull suburban paper pretending to be a respected urban broadsheet. With few exceptions, there's little investigative journalism left within its pages, and most of what gets printed is so tepid and banal that it's almost entirely useless to read.

It's when the reporters start talking about what's happening inside the newsroom that they reveal a deeper and more disturbing problem with the flagship newspaper in Canada's third largest city: one that explains everything that is wrong with the increasing consolidation of the media around the world.

Overly anxious that they're not caught exposing the paper's dirty secret, reporters at the Sun say that morale has hit rock bottom and an alarming atmosphere of fear and paranoia has infected the newsroom. With a tone of anger and resentment, reporters tell stories about vindictive editors who spend more time attacking them over personal and petty grievances than they do worrying about the deteriorating quality of the paper. Anyone that dares question the authority of Editor-in-Chief Patricia Graham is bullied, isolated and forced out of the paper.

Reporters say the story inside the Sun is that inexperienced editors rise through the ranks because they toe the company line or are personal friends with senior editors and not because they produce good journalism or defend the public trust. These newly empowered editors are known for not letting reporters pitch their own ideas and for pushing press releases onto veteran journalists who grudgingly grind out copy before deadline,

caring very little about what they write. Reporters who challenge this system are moved out of their department, questioned about their stories and eventually given an ultimatum by the editors: quit or we'll make your life hell.

“The culture at The Vancouver Sun is incredibly poisonous and it extends right through the newsroom,” confides Charles Campbell, a former editorial board member at the paper, who says he was surprised at how much disdain senior management had towards the paper's star reporters. “There are very few [reporters] who are particularly happy or proud of The Vancouver Sun as a newspaper.”

While the Sun has a long history of acrimonious newsrooms and lengthy labor disputes, it was also once a respected paper that boasted some of the top journalists in the country and consistently broke stories that changed the political landscape of the city and province. When the paper was part of the Southam chain, the newsroom had a bigger budget and more independence – reporters were even allowed to criticize the paper in print. But once CanWest Global Communications got its hands on the Sun in 2000, it slashed funding, silenced writers and allowed an inexperienced, and strangely insecure, management to take control. The paper has never been as irrelevant or dysfunctional as it is today.

CanWest has such a stranglehold on the city that any reporter caught speaking out against them would have trouble finding work in Vancouver again. This toxic environment has created such a chill amongst reporters that getting them to talk about the turmoil is extremely difficult. One news staffer that initially agreed to be quoted as an anonymous source later backed out for fear of repercussion. A former reporter was so worried by the ruthless reach of the editors that they would only talk off-the-record. Most wouldn't even take that risk.

“If [the Editor-in-Chief] found out I talked, I'd be finished,” said one reporter when declining an interview. “If there was another game in town it'd be different, but there's nothing else in this city. There's nowhere else to go.”

CanWest's dominance over Vancouver is extraordinary even in an era of unprecedented global media consolidation and convergence.

Led by CEO Leonard Asper and the powerful Asper family, the Winnipeg-based corporation now owns both of Vancouver's daily newspapers (the Sun and the tabloid Province), the city's top-rated television station (GlobalTV), 12 community newspapers, eight analog and digital television stations, and one of two national papers. For good measure, it also owns the only daily in the nearby provincial capital, Victoria's Times Colonist. A throwback to the classic Company Town, CanWest has turned Vancouver into the single-most media concentrated city in the western world.

Cities thrive in diverse media markets. In Montreal, four different companies own the city's four major dailies, each presenting four unique perspectives on issues that concern its citizens. The same is true in cities from Toronto and New York to London and Paris. But as a small number of corporations swallow up more media outlets every year, the conflicts within the Sun are being duplicated across the country. With the largest private newspaper publisher in Canada, Black Press, recently taking ownership of Osprey, one of the most diverse, just four corporations now control 70 percent of the country's newspaper circulation.

Cities stagnate in consolidated media markets. CanWest has a total of 13 daily newspapers in Canada, where its only competitors are often vapid tabloid or commuter dailies. On the East Coast, the Irving family owns every English-language newspaper in the province of New Brunswick and a series of dailies and weeklies throughout the Maritimes. Without any real competition, these newspapers can manipulate their content to push a single point of view. In Canada, this had led to a one-sided debate on the country's role in Afghanistan, where editorials back the country's military intervention and pay little attention to the mounting civilian casualties and ongoing human rights violations. But nowhere is the freedom of the press in as much danger as Vancouver, where the CanWest monopoly controls an astonishing 70 percent of the entire media market and is the only voice of record for the city.

“The story of the Sun should be presented as a cautionary tale [to the rest of the world],” says Marc Edge, a

former Vancouver journalist and author of *Pacific Press: The Unauthorized Story of Vancouver's Newspaper Monopoly*. "If you want to see the future of media, just look at Vancouver where you have the tightest control of media in the free world. If you allow cross-media ownership like the [Federal Communications Commission in the United States] has been considering, this is how it could end up."

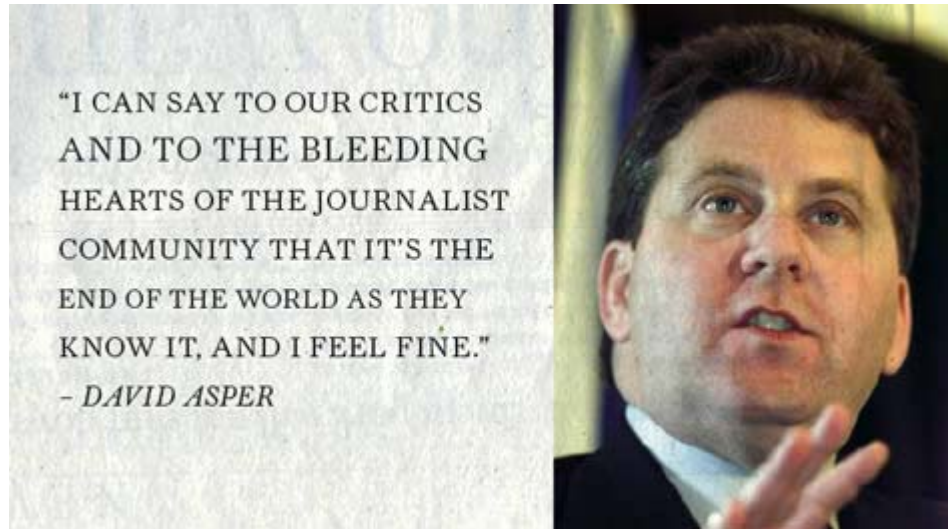


PHOTO: CP Images.

Editorial Eclipse

The internal turmoil of the Sun is a stark contrast to the colorless content on its pages. While almost all corporate newspapers have an obvious pro-business slant, the Sun leaves little doubt about where its bias lies. Corporate press releases are disguised as news stories, puff pieces on right-wing politicians pose as investigative journalism and hatchet jobs on activists purport to be fair and balanced reporting. In 2002, the Sun spent \$3 million to run a series of advertorial stories praising the virtues of British Columbian businesses called 'Believe BC.' The stories weren't marked as advertising features as they should have been, but were either listed as a 'Special Feature' or left completely unmarked.

The timing of the Believe BC series was especially insulting since it came right after the newly elected right-wing provincial government had slashed social services for the poor by \$2 billion while cutting taxes for the rich by \$2 billion. But there has been little coverage in the paper since then of how the cuts caused Vancouver's homeless population to double in just three years. Although Sun reporters aren't given direct orders to write glowing reports about the provincial government, they say they are discouraged from writing claims made by government critics. There has also been a conscious decision from the paper's management to ignore government protesters, even when their actions are top stories for national news agencies. More often than not, the Sun is not the voice of the community, but a mouthpiece for the provincial government – over the years CanWest has donated thousands of dollars to the current provincial government and the Sun employs the premier's brother as a columnist.

However, most troubling of all is that the Sun refuses to be held to account to the many criticisms lobbied at them by media analysts and their own current and former employees. A request for an interview with the paper's Editor-in-Chief, Patricia Graham, was denied because Adbusters is protecting the identity of the Sun reporters who have spoken out.

"The Vancouver Sun has a policy of avoiding the use of unnamed sources," wrote Graham in an email. "We consider it a violation of journalistic ethics to permit people to criticize others while remaining anonymous. I do not care to participate in interviews with publications whose ethical standards I do not share."

Aside from the fact that any Sun reporter named would immediately be fired, Graham overlooks the fact that most media outlets allow anonymous sources if the importance of their information outweighs the potential for public skepticism. But Adbusters couldn't even get a copy of the Sun's code of ethics to verify what the

paper's policy on using anonymous sources actually is. While other news agencies post their code of ethics online, a request to the Sun was denied on the grounds that it's not available to the public. Like much of what is happening in the Sun, the paper seems to prefer keeping the public in the dark.

Black Hole

The Aspers bought the Sun and over 130 newspapers across the country from Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. at a time when major media corporations around the world were clamoring for convergence. But while CanWest had one of the largest television networks in the country, it had zero experience in newspapers. Like many newly formed media conglomerates at the time, it quickly lost millions of dollars trying to make its different media outlets work together. Just as newspaper circulation was plummeting across North America, the Aspers paid Black an inflated \$3.5 billion for a product in an ailing industry that they had no idea how to run.

With their fledgling newspaper empire quickly crumbling and its newly adopted national daily The National Post hemorrhaging profits from the other dailies, the Aspers tried to stop the hemorrhaging with massive layoffs – leaving already thin newsrooms stretched beyond repair. Today, reporters at CanWest papers have to write more stories in less time, which adds another level of pressure in already tense environments. Instead of investigative journalism, there has been an increase in one-source stories. Many reporters have been moved off of beats and turned into general assignment reporters, giving them less knowledge on the issues they cover and less access to sources that help them cultivate and uncover breaking news.

CanWest further exasperated the problem by carelessly spending \$5 million launching its now-defunct, youth-oriented commuter daily, Dose, while saving \$4.6 million this past June by abandoning its partnership with the national newswire, Canadian Press (CP). Reporters across the chain have been extremely distressed by this latest move, saying it will force shorthanded newsrooms to produce extra copy for which the CP co-operative could once be relied upon. Since newspapers are still the best, and often the only, mechanism that gives the public in-depth analysis on issues, all of these cuts have damaged the public's ability to have the kind of qualified and informed debate required in a democracy.

“This whole corporatization of journalism is not healthy,” says Mike Gasher, director of journalism at Concordia University and a former Vancouver Province reporter. “I know journalism is a business, but I think it's just a question of how you strike the balance between the quality of the product and the bottom line. My concern is that when you have these conglomerate ownerships, that not only own several newspapers, but radio, television, internet, then I think by definition the commitment to any one of those properties is decreased.”

CanWest did not return multiple requests for an interview. Adbusters Media Foundation is currently suing CanWest along with another national broadcaster for refusing to air its public awareness campaigns about mass consumerism on their stations, which was also one of the reasons that Graham gave for turning down an interview.

Burnout

The acrimony inside the Sun is excessive when compared to other newspapers, but there are high levels of dissatisfaction and depression in all of CanWest's dailies. Not long after CanWest bought Black's chain, it sparked international uproar when it broke the basic journalistic principle of journalistic autonomy and implemented a national editorial policy. In 2001, the Aspers dictated a series of editorials from Winnipeg and demanded its papers not run any editorial that held views opposed their “core positions” – which primarily focused on lowering taxes and supporting Israel in the Middle East. After journalists at Montreal's The Gazette angrily withheld their bylines, the controversy forced CanWest to drop the policy. However, it sent an early message to its newsrooms that their independence had vanished.

“I can say to our critics and to the bleeding hearts of the journalist community that it's the end of the world as they know it, and I feel fine,” callously said David Asper, the family's publications chairman, about the The

Gazette's protest.

But the national editorial policy was almost benign compared to the firing of Ottawa Citizen publisher Russell Mills for running a feature about then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's suspicious financial dealings and an editorial calling for his resignation. Asper patriarch Izzy Asper (now deceased) had close ties to Chrétien and the country's ruling Liberal Party, and the firing sent a chill throughout the entire CanWest chain that still exists today. Although CanWest has since toned down its editorial interference (its most recent act was to replace all mention of Palestinian "militants" with "terrorists" in newswire copy), reporters at its papers say the damage has already been done.

"People do their jobs, they roll their eyeballs, and a lot of them at quitting time stop thinking about it," says one staffer at The Gazette.

The primary complaint heard from CanWest reporters today is that the corporation's drastic financial cuts have done the most to sink morale. In an almost revolutionary development, editors and publishers at CanWest papers have also begun to openly criticize the Aspers to their reporters because of the budget cuts. The Aspers make a sharp contrast to the CanWest papers' original owners, the Southam family, which turned its newspapers into some of the most competitive and respected in North America. Ironically, CanWest reporters even refer to the Conrad Black era as the "golden age." Although Black cut back on reporters and was reviled as a tyrant with an overt political agenda, he also invested more in his newsrooms. Today, the computers in the Edmonton Journal newsroom are so old that staff can't even access their own paper's website.

"It's depressing," says a Journal reporter, "and it makes you wonder about the future. There are all sorts of new pressures going on in today's media, and most of us don't have confidence that the Aspers have the business acumen to deal with these pressures in an effective way."

Shine A Light

While CanWest's control over Canada's media sheds a disturbing light on the future of media consolidation, the concentration of ownership has in actuality been a major problem brewing in Canada for the past half-century. When The Vancouver Sun and The Province first merged their competing newspapers under a single management company called Pacific Press in 1957 because of economic problems, the federal government investigated the deal and found it would likely be "to the detriment of the public." However, it backed away from taking any action.

When corporate chains came to control an alarming 77 percent of the country's circulation, the 1970 Davey Committee stated that "all transactions that increase concentration of ownership in the mass media are undesirable and contrary to the public interest – unless otherwise shown," and recommended the country form a press review board to rule on mergers. However, none of its recommendations were implemented.

When two major newspaper chains, Southam and Thompson, colluded to each shut down a competing newspaper in Ottawa and Winnipeg in 1980 and both of Vancouver's daily newspapers were officially handed over to the Southams, the Royal Commission on Newspapers stated that "freedom of the press is not a property right of owners," and recommended strict ownership limits. Again, no action was taken.

And when a Senate committee on media concentration released a report in 2006 stating, "the concentration of ownership has reached levels that few other countries would consider acceptable" and recommended that large mergers be publicly reviewed, it was outright dismissed by Heritage Minister Bev Oda who argued that "convergence has become an essential business strategy in order to stay competitive."

Despite an endless amount of evidence provided by federal commissions and investigations showing how dangerous it is to a democracy when fewer companies control the media market – foreign bureaus are reduced, staff is cut back and quality diminished – no Canadian government has ever tried to put the brakes on consolidation. By ignoring the problem for the past 50 years, it has been allowed to grow into a full-blown

crisis.

Today, reporters at CanWest simply go through the motions and many veteran journalists say their main goal is to try and get an early buyout from the corporation. Others say they personally tell journalism students to stay out of the business. Seeing the writing on the wall, many journalism students at colleges and universities from Vancouver to Ottawa say they have little interest entering an industry that they had such high hopes for only a few years earlier. Once considered a respected and noble profession that challenged authority and represented its community, CanWest's consolidation has killed any sense of pride Canadian journalist once had in their job.

The most obvious example of consolidation run amok is Vancouver, where one corporation has such a tight control over the city that it gets away with bullying its reporters and slanting its news coverage without ever being challenged. The problems inside the Sun and CanWest papers will be repeated across the country if consolidation is allowed to continue unabated. Because the priority of the paper's corporate controller is on the bottom line instead of the public trust, a once-proud newspaper chain has turned into a skeleton of its former self. Reporters at CanWest papers who don't conform the corporate perspective have few options or alternatives since CanWest owns the majority of media in most of their cities. Despite the restrictions, some reporters have managed to produce good journalism, but those that try to speak out have been harassed, silenced and sent packing. When journalists are denied the resources and can't truthfully disseminate information, the entire public is held hostage. It's time to set them free.

_Sean Condon

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