

**The Missing News: Filters and Blind Spots in Canada's Press.** Edited by Robert A. Hackett & Richard Gruneau with Donald Gutstein & Timothy A. Gibson. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives/Aurora: Garamond Press, 2000. 258 pp. ISBN 0886271738 (CCPA); 1551930277 (Garamond).

Perhaps the truest definition of news was uttered by Tommy Lytle, who for many years decided what to put on the front pages of Canada's largest newspaper. "News," the former *Toronto Star* editor said, "is what I say it is."

There you have it in seven words: The problem with news is that, in the end, it is selected according to what you have available and what you think your readers want. It is not selected by any scientific measure of novelty or significance; rather, it is done on the run by editors who do not have to explain themselves to anyone, except perhaps their publishers, whose main job is to deliver as many readers as possible to advertisers.

Taking a hard look at what gets play in the news—and, especially, at what does not—is timely and valuable in this era of rapidly converging media, where giant corporations are gobbling up newspapers and magazines to feed the electronic media; where the same news reports are being repackaged from print to the Internet; and where more value is placed on rewarding shareholders than on rewarding readers. In the last five years, Conrad Black has built the largest newspaper empire in Canadian history, and disposed of it. Some papers have gone through four owners in that period, and most are now in the hands of people who earned their wealth in telephones, television, or the Internet.

Mergers like CanWest's takeover of most of Black's Hollinger newspapers have placed even more media in fewer hands. It is unprecedented that one person, Izzy Asper, can own both daily newspapers in Vancouver, plus two of the city's television channels. The so-called "free marketplace of ideas" that has more or less justified freedom of the press in this country is in danger of becoming another carefully packaged monopoly.

How interested are these mega-owners in giving Canadians a balanced and representative look at themselves? Where do their editors and producers send reporters in search of news? If there are blind spots, what are they and why is some news being ignored?

Newswatch Canada, a media-monitoring project that has been based in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University since 1993, has set out to measure what gets filtered out in the daily rush to record history on the run. To their credit, the supervising professors who wrote this book acknowledge the "huge methodological challenge" they face. But in the end, they whip out their chi-squares and start measuring the news with a whim of steel.

As much as I support what the authors are trying to do (I served as one of their judges for the most underreported stories of 1995), I feel this book is premature and flawed in several important ways.

Based on research largely done by students, *The Missing News* asserts that the media give disproportionate access and weight to conservative and establishment opinions when reporting on key political and economic issues. They say that these

sources, combined with the media's reluctance to devote the time and resources in investigative journalism, result in news that legitimizes established institutions and their agendas. They say this effectively marginalizes coverage of such things as hunger, poverty, and systemic environmental degradation. They say this is "not simply the product of chance," and that powerful owners like Conrad Black sometimes interfere with editorial decision-making to impose their political agendas.

All of this may be true, but their research is eclectic, uneven, and unconvincing. What are we to make of a national poll answered by 57 journalists, a sample the authors admit is "not statistically representative in any way"? The authors devote a whole chapter to it. What credence are we supposed to give to a content analysis that examines only 14 newspaper articles published over five years? The authors generously credit it with yielding "suggestive results." One tires of constantly reading qualifiers such as "of course, these studies are far from definitive," or "we don't want to exaggerate, but . . ."

This is quite apart from what Newswatch chooses to examine. It seems to assume that some sort of right-wing conspiracy lurks behind much of what appears in newspapers. For example, one study counts how many times business stories quote right-wing think tanks like the Fraser Institute, as opposed to left-wing ones like the Council of Canadians. This yields the unsurprising news that right outranks left by 68% to 20% (a fact that could be largely accounted for by the Fraser Institute's better funding and publicity apparatus). Curiously and reprehensibly, nowhere do the authors make note of the fact that one of the left-wing groups they include in this study is their co-publisher, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

It is too bad the Newswatch project has been diverted from its original purpose, which was to try to identify significant stories that were underreported by the daily press. A three-year research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council mandated a more academic approach in 1995. The trouble with this is that the professors try to overlay this research only onto things they noted in their earlier, episodic "lists" of underreported stories, which were drawn in large part from the alternative press. This creates its own methodological blind spot.

The authors say, no doubt with tongue in cheek, that they began Newswatch, in part, to engage communications students in media analysis that was "relevant to the real world we keep hearing was out there somewhere" (p. 12). In fact, many of the views of news gathering cited in their book come from people one or two steps removed from the process, like the professor of government at Wesleyan University defining news as "not what happens but what someone says has happened or will happen" (p. 39). That does not begin to explain the news value of E. Coli-induced deaths in Walkerton, or the Russian submarine disaster.

Very few reporters and no owners are interviewed, despite the book's indictment of their motivations and actions. Examples of how owners think seem to be drawn from the 20-year-old Kent Royal Commission on Newspapers instead of

fresh interviews with the likes of Black, Pierre-Karl Péladeau, Izzy Asper, John Honderich, or Kenneth Thomson.

The distance the authors and their students keep from the industry they are studying produces the inevitable howlers. Peter White, the Hollinger director and early partner of Conrad Black, is identified as the former editor of *Saturday Night*. That would be Kenneth Whyte, now editor of *The National Post*. Peter Calamai was never managing editor of the *Ottawa Citizen*, but rather its editorial page editor. And saying that concentration of ownership of Canadian newspapers is the highest in the Western world ignores the case of Australia, where Rupert Murdoch controls 67% of national circulation (Black never held more than 45%).

A few of the authors' conclusions strike me as rather naïve. It is one thing to criticize coverage of the 1997 seizure of hostages in the Japanese embassy in Peru, but quite another to fault the world's press for relying on government sources (to the exclusion of the terrorists who were seeking to draw attention to human rights abuses). And it is even more naïve to expect that Canadian news organizations will station correspondents full-time in that country so they can develop better sources. There are precious few Canadian correspondents even in major foreign news capitals like London, Tokyo, and Beijing. And is it realistic to expect labour unions, the Canadian Association of Journalists, or individual reporters to democratize newsrooms from within (perhaps by insisting that they elect their editors)? The eventual capitulation of the union that struck Hollinger's *Calgary Herald* for eight months should demonstrate the futility of that.

The authors say they have "only begun to make small slices into the media cake to sample its flavour" (p. 228). There is not much in *The Missing News* to hang your hat on, nor is there any chance their scattergun approach will convince news editors or publishers to change their ways. A better strategy for Newswatch might be to conduct a comprehensive survey of journalists at all levels in order to examine the political and social values they bring to the news. This has been done successfully in the United States by Cleveland Wilhoit & David Weaver, who published their findings in *The American Journalist* (1991), but has never been done in this country.

#### Reference

Weaver, David H., & Wilhoit, G. Cleveland. (1991). *The American journalist: A portrait of U.S. news people and their work*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

John Miller  
Ryerson Polytechnic University