

Would the Real Journalists Please Stand Up!¹

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Media — and journalists have a central role in political life. In principle, they facilitate well informed citizens participating efficiently in the public affairs of the City. What types of journalist? What media? In what context? For what kind of democracy?

It will be understood, when reading the title of this paper, “Would the real journalists please stand up!,” that it is tongue in cheek. Of course, there is no genuine or ungentle journalist, but this title is relevant to my point related to the difficulty of defining journalism and fixing the role of journalists in the political process. My 1986 version of the *Petit Robert* dictionary mentions that a journalist is a person who collaborates in the editing of a journal. My recent *Larousse* includes “audiovisual” as an almost legal definition, not unlike the one set up by the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec; a journalist is a “person whose main occupation, performed on a regular basis and paid for, is to perform journalistic activities in one or more of the written and audiovisual media.” We have not moved very far with that. What is common, then to the editor of *La Presse* or the *Globe and Mail* and the chronicler of gastronomy in the same newspapers? What is com-

¹ This paper is partly based on work done previously over a period of 15 years, on journalists and their practices, as well as on recent research on the ownership of media done at the Centre d'études sur les médias.

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mon to the reporter of news items on *Télévision Quatre Saisons*, or *City TV* in Toronto, and the financial chronicler of the *Report on Business* of the *Globe and Mail* or of *Les Affaires*? Nevertheless we say they are all journalists. In various ways, each is contributing to the democratic process.

Twenty years ago, in a study done for the Kent Commission on Daily Newspapers, Simon Langlois and I proposed a typology of journalists which distinguished among four “species” or groups: educators, invested with a “mission,” reporters, analyst-surveyors; and seducers (Langlois and Sauvageau, 1982). Our survey dealt with journalists working in the print media in Québec. There were a greater number of educators at *Le Devoir*, the seducers were found in tabloids such as *Le Journal de Montréal* and *Le Journal de Québec*, or in the sports sections of all daily newspapers. Analyst-surveyors were numerous at *La Presse* and *Le Soleil*. The reporters, who prefer to confine themselves to repeating what their sources tell them, were found mostly in the regional press, where a direct and constant relationship between the journalist, his environment and his sources places a restriction on his ability to manoeuvre and his freedom; this confines him to the role as notary of current events.

The educator on the one hand, the seducer on the other. I used to tell my students that the journalist is a tightrope walker, balancing, on the one hand, the mission of public service and information assigned to him, concerned with democratic vitality and social responsibility, but, on the other hand, working for a firm whose objectives are more and more devoted to profits. The journalist is this tightrope walker, bound to his “civic” mission of providing information, but aware that he is part of a competing market, concerned with consumption, entertainment and leisure, all of which enlist takers more easily than public service content. In a world of exhibition and entertainment, where the best way of attracting the public is sought (by the so-called “economy of attention”), if the journalist does not succeed in being interesting, be it in the electronic or print media, he will be “zapped” rapidly for something else.

The journalist will be torn between two loyalties. He is under a formal contract with the medium that is his employer, but is bound by another contract, implicit and moral, which links him to a public that, according to journalistic ideals, he has an obligation to inform. How to reconcile that responsibility (some senior journalists speak of “vocation”) and the status of an employee in an enterprise whose particular interests occasionally, if not often, do not coincide with public interest?² What is the influence of the en-

⁴This question became acute in December 2001, when the group ConWest Global chose to impose to its most important daily newspapers of its Southam chain the publication once a week of the same editorial. Its executive reminded to the journalists of *The Gazette* their «duties» of employees, as that decision was disputed because of its consequence on the diversity of opinion and the democratic debate.

terprise on how journalism is practised? The journalist is also working in a particular milieu, in a society whose cultural traits and political environment are factors not to be neglected, and which contribute in their own way to define how journalism is practised.

1. JOURNALISTS, MEDIA, SOCIETY

It is interesting to go back to what Balzac had to say about journalism. In his *Monographie de la presse parisienne*, first published in 1843 and re-issued in 1991 by Arléa Publisher, he talks about how journalism is moulded by society: “The Press of London does not see the world in the same way that the Parisian one does: its approach is peculiar to England, which is rather selfish in every matter. This selfishness can be called patriotism, since patriotism is nothing other than the selfishness of that particular country. There is thus a huge difference between English journalists and French journalists. An Englishman is first English, then journalist. A Frenchman is first journalist, then French.”

In Québec and in English Canada, language and culture can have opposite influences. According to what is often held, the first allegiance of Francophone journalists is to society. They are Quebeckers first, then journalists. The journalist in English speaking Canada is, on the contrary, a disinterested observer and the “objective reporter” that the North American tradition has set up as an ideal. A great many people think that a distinct journalism is practiced in Québec, much closer to the journalism of opinion found in Europe. It can be characterized, as Lysiane Gagnon put it in *La Presse* twenty years ago, by “the predominance of analysis as opposed to factual reports of events [and] the propensity to approach things from the angle of ideas rather than facts and individuals.” The Royal Commission on Daily Newspapers (the Kent Commission) went so far as to assert in 1981 that the “French Canadian journalist, like the priest or the politician, has always been, willy nilly, invested with a certain nationalistic mission.” Even in 1996, in the re-issue of his book *Politics and the Media in Canada*, Arthur Siegel said of the French press that it was maintaining an “intense political commitment.”

This was true in the past, and is still true for a small number of journalists. However, in 1996, at the time David Pritchard and I did a survey of journalists in Canada, on what their motivations and perceptions of their role were, similarities between Anglophones and Francophones were more numerous than differ-

ences (Pritchard and Sauvageau, 1999). Our results contradicted certain generally accepted ideas; they show that journalists of the two linguistic groups share the same convictions and that their ways of approaching journalism are similar. Among other things, the accurate transmission of content (the dominating trait of journalism in North America) is seen as the most important quality of journalism. Influencing opinion or the political agenda are, for Francophone and for Anglophone journalists, at the bottom of the list of priorities of how journalism should be seen. The content of Francophone and Anglophone media is obviously different. But they bear witness to two distinct societies, one in isolation from the other. But the way journalists speak of them is the same.

On the other hand, this survey, the first pan-Canadian survey of a representative sample (550) of journalists in the two linguistic communities, covering all types of media and all regions of Canada, showed that there are two streams or two main ways of practicing journalism within the belief system that transcends the linguistic communities. In the private sector, especially in radio and television, a significant number of journalists were oriented toward commercial practice, seeking as many viewers and listeners as possible. Their main concern was entertaining the public. There is another type of journalism in Canada, which is more of the public service type and concerned with democratic life. The support for this view exemplified by words like “investigation,” “analysis” and “a critical point of view,” is found more frequently at Radio-Canada and the CBC, where journalists are in a way the incarnation of the “journalism of citizenship” (see table).

Table:

Importance of 14 journalistic functions, according to whether one is working for Radio-Canada/CBC or for the private audiovisual sector

Function	R-C/CBC	Private Audiovisual
To report faithfully the statements of personalities interviewed	3,90 (90 %)	3,76 (83 %)
To investigate government activities and public institutions	3,89 (89 %)****	3,50 (61 %)
To analyze and interpret hard stakes	3,84 (86 %)****	3,35 (51 %)

To report information to the public rapidly	3,68 (74 %)*	3,84 (87 %)
To debate public policies while they are being considered	3,65 (74 %)**	3,23 (45 %)
To remain sceptical about the behaviour of public figures	3,33 (58 %)*	3,05 (41 %)
To remain sceptical about the behaviour of the business world	3,32 (58 %)**	2,99 (38 %)
To put the accent on news that may be of interest to larger audiences	3,00 (37 %)*	3,40 (56 %)
To extend the field of cultural concerns of the public	2,83 (33 %)*	2,53 (19 %)
To increase audience ratings	2,28 (10 %)**	3,03 (38 %)
To fill up free time, to entertain	2,11 (10 %)**	2,50 (18 %)
To influence public opinion	2,09 (10 %)	1,88 (6 %)
To influence the political agenda	1,80 (8 %)*	1,58 (2 %)
N (weighted)	94	153

Average answers by function, on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 means “not important,” 2 “somewhat important,” 3 “fairly important,” 4 “very important.” The numbers in parentheses are the percentages of those who answered “very important” to each function. The number of asterisks indicates the statistical magnitude of the difference between the public and the private sectors.

John Meisel has demonstrated above the role of Radio-Canada in the handing down of culture in this country. Journalism can more easily fit into this more general picture. There are enormous differences between this “citizenship” approach by journalists in the public media — Radio-Canada and CBC, Anglophone and Francophone — and that of the private sector who give the impression of seeing themselves mainly from a market point of view. Far more than sociodemographic factors, such as belonging to a linguistic community, where one works, as well as the nature and objectives of the employer, shape the way journalism is practiced. In a study for the Kent Commission, Simon Langlois and I arrived at the same conclusions. The journalists of *Le Devoir* did not see themselves the same way those of *Le Journal de Montréal* did. Several other studies have shown the determining role of the news firm in defining the type of journalism close to their hearts.

David Pritchard and I have also compared our data with those of the last large survey of American journalists, published by David Weaver and C. G. Wilhoit in 1996. If we remove the journalists of CBC and Radio-Canada from our sample, there are only slight differences between how American and Canadian

journalists view their role and the way they practice it. What makes the difference between Canada and the United States is the Radio-Canada/CBC way of seeing journalism as a public service. But the continuing decline of public radio and television in the past decade speaks to the decline of that distinct type of journalism, and the increase in commercial journalism, making uniform the journalistic practices of both countries. This leads to globalization.

What is globalization in the world of media? It is not just the world wide prevalence of American cultural products. It is also the adoption almost everywhere in the world of the same model of communication, the same media model, the same journalistic model, the commercial model.

2. MEDIA, GLOBALIZATION AND DEMOCRACY

Great changes have transformed the Canadian media landscape during the last decade. The expansion of private firms and the concentration of media properties in fewer hands, in Canada as well as elsewhere, have occurred at the same time as the cutting back of media representing public service. Important groups in several countries have convinced their governments of the necessity of letting “national champions” grow, able to compete with AOL Time Warner and the rising conglomerates on the international scene. This, more often than not, has coincided with the diminution of the audiovisual public service, with extreme examples in cases such as New Zealand, where public television, under the conservative government, was sold off in 1999, to bring in dividends to the State.

In Canada, values of entertainment and exhibition have also invaded the field of journalism, especially television, with the enthusiastic participation of certain journalists, even at times at Radio-Canada, who share an idea of information which is more oriented towards satisfying public interest rather than serving the public interest as traditionally understood. Because of television’s role as the main source of information for citizens, David Pritchard and I raise the following question in the conclusion to our book *Les journalistes canadiens, un portrait de fin de siècle*: “One of the most pertinent questions at present is to see how far entertainment journalism is undermining the understanding of public issues on the part of the viewer and jeopardizing his ability to think critically.”

Some fear more the control of ideas — “the single thought” — and the uniformity of information that could result from the concentration of media ownership. Members of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) wondered about it in the spring of 2001, on the occasion of the renewal of the licenses of CTV and Global — which are now merged with daily newspapers — as to the standardization and the shrinking of the diversity of information that could be a consequence of the simultaneous ownership of newspapers and television networks. In the case of Can West Global, the problem was to see whether the CRTC would accept that it could simultaneously own newspapers and television stations in approximately ten of the major cities in this country. The same questions are raised about the acquisition of the TVA television network by Québecor, owner of the most important daily newspapers in Montréal and Québec in terms of circulation. This concern with diversity expressed by the regulatory agency is an irritant to larger conglomerates, especially in English Canada.³

Can we still seriously consider those conglomerates as agents of democratic pluralism? Can we still think, without laughing, that they have some role in the political process? Where is freedom of the press now? When reading the *National Post* — more biased than any Québec daily papers in recent decades — which is running a *pro domo* campaign and against the CRTC,⁴ one is of the impression that a century has elapsed since the answer the Kent Commission raised to this question in 1981: “Freedom of the press is not a prerogative of the owners of media. It is the right of the public.” This would mean that modern media should play the role of the forum, open to everyone in the Greek City. The “diversity of voices,” according to Terence Corcoran (2001), one of the promoters of the free market and who writes a column in the *National Post*, has become the “buzz word” of the CRTC, which would corrupt the orientation of the Broadcasting Act. Thus Corcoran writes of that “anti-concept” (the diversity of voices) as a tool of political correctness which undermines “genuine freedom of speech.” What type of freedom of “genuine” speech does Mr. Corcoran desire, what type of freedom of the press? The freedom of expression of large size firms? Of BCA, Global and Québecor? Or freedom for everyone and a diversity of voices essential to the democratic debate? As Armand Mattelart put it (1997), the search for global culture and globalization embodied by conglomerates has created a lasting tension between “commercial freedom of expression” and “civic freedom of expression.”

³ These “irritants” have since softened as the CRTC, which seems to accept concentration as inevitable, has renewed, with some token requirements, the licenses of CTV, regrouped with the *Globe and Mail* within Bell Globemedia, and those of Global (regrouped with the Southam newspapers within Can West Global, and it has authorized the transfer of ownership of Vidéotron (and TVA) to Québecor.

⁴ The *National Post* is owned by the Can West Group, whose licenses for Global need to be renewed by the CRTC.

3. IS IT “APOCALYPSE NOW”?

Some are of the opinion, more often in the United States than anywhere else, that the evolution in recent years of the frantic pursuit of profit has led the media to relinquish their social responsibility and to find it, one must look elsewhere, to non profit foundations and universities, to find new ways of encouraging public discussion. The analysis of those alarmists is overgeneralized. In the media at large, this does not exist! As we have seen, journalism as such does not exist, but rather journalisms and diverse types of journalists. It is urgent that Canada reaffirm the importance of public broadcasting and the kind of distinct journalism that was done some years ago in Europe with the Amsterdam Protocole, annexed to the European Union Treaty, it tries to reconcile the construction of a unique market with the responsibility of radio and television, “directly tied to the democratic social and cultural needs of each society and to the necessity of maintaining pluralism in the media.”

Others show no interest in professional journalism, which they see as predictable and mechanical; they pretend a “new type of journalism” is in the process of being created, in the new form of information and interactivity being developed on the Internet and at the same time a wider and more open democracy. These “new media,” so say those enthusiasts who more often than not place their faith only in technology, do not abide the norms of professional journalism, and are above all a counterweight to the dominant way of thinking. They create unusual ways for feeding the democratic debate. And they are not totally wrong, quite the contrary. But the lacunae of the Internet are numerous, not to mention the absence of verification of the information obtained there.

Others, including myself — reformists — are of the opinion that the media must change and become hospitable to readers and to groups that form “civil society.” As Peter Newman wrote (2001): “They should all have their say. Unprofessional journalism it may be, but new voices with new ideas will be the result.” The new chief editor of *La Presse*, André Pratte (2001), sees his role in an original way: “to enter into a dialogue with the readers and, with them, to take part in public debates.” Is the journalism of public service going to be re-invented from Vancouver to Montréal in a new relationship with the public? Opinions and points of views are not the only things that are important. “News” per se is also essential for debating the affairs of the city. It is hard to see who other than journalists could serve that function, whether they are educators or seducers, holders of public service or of market, specialists or generalists, “writers of in-depth articles or of gossip,” as Balzac wrote in the 19th century. All contribute, in their own ways, to meeting the increasingly complex needs of democracy.

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