

WHY JOURNALISTS?

We begin with an example that has gained legendary notoriety among supporters of the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance. In April 1997, Canadian political parties and the media were gearing up for a spring election campaign. That campaign would centre on issues nearly devoid of substantive policy content, focusing instead on symbolic issues such as which political party was truly “Canadian.” Perhaps most astonishing, at least for its supporters, one party, Reform, was labelled by the others and by the leaders of those parties as racist. The NDP leader, Alexa McDonough, stated that the Reform Party’s stance on Quebec would incite civil war (Canadian Press 1997). Name calling by political opponents is certainly not new in election campaigns, nor is it new for the media to report those allegations. What was unusual is that on 22 April 1997 – before the campaign had begun – the media, on their own initiative, declared that Reform was racist. Peter Mansbridge, the anchor for Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC’s) flagship news program, *The National*,¹ started the domestic segment of the news by linking the Reform and Liberal parties:

Mansbridge: Well, with an election just around the corner, all parties want to avoid controversy. But today, both Reform and the Liberals seemed to slip on one of the most dangerous topics of all: race. We have two reports. First, Saša Petricic, on Reform’s false step.

Saša Petricic: For British Columbia, the Sikh community has become a potent political force for the Reform Party; commenting on that has become a potent political liability. Once again, bringing charges of racism, when Reform can least afford them. At issue, an interview Reform's chief BC organizer George Rigaux made to the *Vancouver Sun*, accusing the local Sikh temple of conspiring to nominate Sikhs to represent Sikhs in every party in the riding of Surrey Central.

When he finished discussing the issue, Petricic took comments from interested parties.

Petricic: The charge brought a quick reaction from Sikhs, including Reform's own candidate in the riding – Gurmant Grewal.

Grewal: Mr. Rigaux's comments are unacceptable to the community, and unacceptable to me.

Herb Dhaliwal (BC Liberal MP): I'm not surprised by those comments. I think it just shows the true colours of many of their members and what the Reform Party stand for.

After the Reform Party and others commented on the situation, Petricic wrapped up the story with this conclusion:

Petricic: Over the past three years, Reform has tried to put to rest charges of racism in the party. It's even threatened to sue opponents who make the accusation; but time and again, Reform's protests have been overshadowed by comments that seem to confirm the worst. In this case, at the worst possible time. Saša Petricic, CBC News, Ottawa.

No one but Petricic called the Reform Party racist: not the Reform candidate in the riding, and not the incumbent Liberal member of Parliament. A common technique on television news shows is to "segue" or link one story with its successor. Here the bridge was provided by the term *race*; in the next item reporter Neil MacDonald reported on a Liberal candidate who had changed his position on Aboriginal peoples and gained the nomination. Mansbridge set the stage by saying, "As for the Liberals, one of their candidates

said today, his views on race have changed. Just before the last election, Hector Clouthier made some stinging comments about Native people. Those comments were not widely reported at the time, but CBC News has received a videotape of them, from an unknown source. Neil MacDonald now, with the tale of the tape.” MacDonald described the candidate and his riding. He then showed clips that indicated Clouthier’s position on Aboriginal issues:

[Clip] *Hector Clouthier (Liberal candidate)*: But before you start worrying about what’s in somebody else’s backyard, I suggest you should take a look at your own. Many, many reserves, and I say this respectfully, leave a lot to be desired when it comes to proper management and cleanliness.

MacDonald: On Native land claims ...

[Clip] *Clouthier*: If you don’t pay the piper my friend, you don’t call the tune. The Natives are net consumers of public wealth on a scale that would simply astonish anyone who has lived or worked near them.

MacDonald: And on Native environmental policies ...

[Clip] *Clouthier*: They are saying we’re not interested in money, and they want to get back to the land, and yet many of them are trying to wring every dollar they can get from the government from subsidies.

MacDonald: Those views were expressed by Clouthier just before the last election; as a result, the Liberals refused to let him stand for the party in 1993. He vowed to get even, ran as an independent, and lost. The Liberals then retaliated by expelling him and banning him from running as a Liberal for five years. Now, though, Clouthier is back: the party has changed its mind; all is forgiven.

[Visual clips]

MacDonald: And today, a contrite Clouthier retracted the remarks completely.

Clouthier: I think they were rather obtuse, ill-headed, and just plain stupid. If anyone from the Aboriginal community took offence to those remarks that I made on the night of February 10th, 1992, I truly am sorry, and I regret having said them. I guess, what else can I say?

MacDonald: But on a local talk show in Pembroke, months after he made the first remarks, Clouthier was sure of his convictions.

[Clip] *Clouthier*: I stand by everything I said that night. I will not retract any statements whatsoever.

MacDonald: The official party line is that Clouthier should not be punished forever for a few remarks he made, a few years ago. Neil MacDonald, CBC News, Ottawa.

No one denounced Clouthier as a racist. No one, including Mansbridge and MacDonald, confirmed or disputed Clouthier's allegations or the attitude that evidently warranted an apology. In the British Columbia story, Petricic indicated that even commenting on the undisputed fact that the Sikh community was an important presence in both the Reform and Liberal parties had become "a potent political liability." No one in the media indicated that, in most instances, a pervasive understanding of political correctness prevented such comments, nor did anyone indicate what the consequences of silence might be.

Perhaps more important, in the BC Reform story no one except the reporter called the party racist. Was this a case of an anti-Reform attitude? Does it betray a more general "left-leaning" perspective? Or does it show that journalists are quick to revive past dramatic instances of name-calling? In both stories an individual or party was trying to change its past image, and on the surface, at least, CBC seemed to indicate it liked reformed Liberals, but not Reform. In the event, the Liberals were able to avoid the label "racist," whereas it dogged the Reform Party throughout the subsequent campaign. However politically incorrect both sets of comments may have been made to seem, neither was obviously incorrect in a factual sense.

Journalists often say that their negative focus and their critical treatment of people, issues, and events is not limited to people on the right of the political spectrum. They say they are also critical of the left. Indeed, for most journalists, this is what fairness and balance mean. Here, for example, one might consider the initial media coverage, in the United States, in Canada, and around the world, a few months later when President Bill Clinton's affair with one-time White House intern Monica Lewinsky became public. The president's wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, went on national television to defend her husband. Her comments were widely and fully reported in Canada, including on the CBC national news. On the 27 January 1998

National she charged, “The great story here, for anybody willing to find it and write about it and explain it, is this vast right-wing conspiracy that has been conspiring against my husband since the day he announced for president.”

Could this be true? Were the media complicit in a vast right-wing conspiracy against the president of the United States? If so, was the opposition justified on ideological grounds? Perhaps President Clinton rubbed journalists the wrong way, though the evidence that had been broadcast of his engaging personality seemed strong enough. A ready-made explanation for this charge by Mrs. Clinton lay close at hand: ratings, and thus profits. Lee Bacchus in a *Calgary Herald* story published on 28 January 1998 drew attention to this issue:

But can you blame the broadcast media? If the Clinton affair has the dank smell of misplaced passions, it also reeks of the sweet aroma of money.

CNN’s Larry King doubled its seasonal average of viewers last Wednesday night. Fox News quadrupled its average. And the new Geraldo – even without scheduling a live demonstration of sexual techniques as he might have in the old days – averaged 1.1 million homes tuned in, up from his average of about half a million.

Moreover, the ratings-and-profits explanation seemed to be confirmed by the millions of viewers who watched Barbara Walters’s two-hour prime-time interview with Monica Lewinsky after the end of the Senate impeachment trial. A negative spin to the news has often been attributed to the profit motive. But which perspective is the correct one? How can it be true that, on the one hand, the media are left-leaning and out to get right-of-centre politicians for ideological reasons, and on the other hand capitalistic and out to get left-leaning politicians in order to make money? That is one of the questions addressed by this study. What moves the media? Are they driven by the profit motive, or do the personal backgrounds and idiosyncratic opinions of journalists make a difference in the type of news we receive?

Critics on the left and on the right have their own reasons to find fault with the media. The argument has also been made, however, that “everyone” hates the media in the sense that the media can be blamed for the ills of society, irrespective of the critic’s ideological position. Scholars, pundits, and the public alike attack the media for problems ranging from low voter turnout

to teenage pregnancy, from crime in the streets to low self-esteem among elementary school boys. Well-respected authors, commentators, and journalists themselves have made careers attacking and criticizing the media. We consider some aspects of this question in the following chapter. It seems to us unclear a priori whether institutional constraints or the opinions of journalists have a greater effect on the production of news, but we begin from the position that reporting practices matter and that the individual attitudes of reporters can influence their reporting.

What follows includes a consideration of the kinds of things that are systematically excluded from media reports and to that extent revisits arguments made in earlier studies (Cooper 1994; Miljan and Cooper 1999). In keeping with the view that sins of omission are significant, we shall give an account of what we do not discuss in this book before indicating what we do consider.

The purpose of this work is not primarily an examination of the accuracy of news reporting – although some discussion of this question inevitably arises in our analysis of economic issues – but an analysis of the individuals who produce and present the news. Numerous studies examine the constraints of the newsroom and journalistic notions of professionalism and how the job limits their time. Other studies examine organizational routines and pressures such as government and advertisers. This is not one of them. We do not offer an apology for news reporting, nor do we provide criticism of the day-to-day workings of newsrooms in Canada. Those questions concern important problems in organizational behaviour, but they are not the focus of this study. There may be many things that influence how the news is reported; we focus our attention on only one of them: the journalists themselves.

News journalists are not the only members of the media who influence public opinion. For example, it has been suggested that US talk-show host Oprah Winfrey is more influential in Canada than all Canadian newscasters combined. The fact that the US Cattle Producers Association chose to sue her for comments made about beef illustrates the degree to which it respects her ability to sway the public. In Canada, media personalities such as hockey commentator Don Cherry also evoke strong opinions. Cherry's critical remarks about the Bloc Québécois resulted in Bell Canada pulling its advertising spots from broadcasts of Quebec hockey games and in an investigation

by the CBC ombudsman. Granted, then, that television personalities may have influence with their audiences, they too are not the subjects of this inquiry. The influence of Oprah Winfrey in particular or of American media in general are worthy subjects for another study. Nor is the influence of the likes of Don Cherry, which may well be great, of concern here. Rather, we are interested, in part, in the people that Cherry complains about: the Quebec news media. We will compare French and English journalists in terms of their backgrounds, attitudes, and beliefs, and see how those factors influence their reporting of the news. Accordingly, we also examine the content of news in Canada and compare the way news is reported with the self-descriptions of journalists.

Our own most fundamental assumption begins with the notion that almost by definition the media are in the middle. They mediate. But what are they in the middle of? What do they mediate between (or among)? And who are those in the midst of the media? Those are the questions this study also addresses. To answer these and other questions, this study looks to journalists' opinions and values. These attitudes are compiled using standard polling techniques. That is, we interview a random sample of English- and French-speaking journalists. We ask them questions about where they work, who they vote for, and what they think about public policy issues. In addition, we conduct a simultaneous survey of the general public, asking the same questions. This allows us to see not only what journalists in Canada think but also how their views compare with the public they serve. Because these surveys are based on random sampling, we do not know who the journalists are. What we are able to do is generalize our findings to Canadian journalists working at that time. To make the link between journalists' opinions and media content we then conduct content analyses of several daily newspaper and television outlets. The journalist opinions on the economy, social issues, and national unity are compared statistically with the sample newspapers.

On the surface, the media are nothing more than communication facilitators, a means of bringing people together. Once they facilitate people coming together, however, how can such people be unaware of themselves as having come together? But this is a rough-and-ready meaning of what democracy is. Small wonder, then, that in modern democracies the media are accorded a place of great importance. This is not, therefore, a trivial and merely "academic" study.

We think the media are important in Canada, as in other democracies, and in this book we examine one of the reasons why they are important. We start with the most obvious and commonsensical observation: the media matter because they communicate the news. It is important in modern democracies to know what is new, which is what gives force to the very modern aphorism that nothing is as stale as yesterday's news. Entertainment shares with the news the characteristic of having to be up to date. Entertainment is about the latest trends, about what we ought to find entertaining. This is why some students of the media, notably Neil Postman (1985), have made a good case that television can do nothing but entertain.

We will leave this issue aside in order to make the observation that journalists do not think of themselves as mere entertainers. They are more important than that, not least of all because of the aforementioned importance of the media in Canadian and other democracies. The media are important in non-democratic regimes as well, but for different reasons. Our concern is the media in Canada, and the aspect of the importance we examine in this book is whether the opinions of journalists influence the news they produce. We think the opinions of journalists are important because those opinions influence the news they produce. The burden of this book is to prove it.

No doubt critics will dismiss this book as being irrelevant. Many media scholars, especially in the United States, have moved beyond discussions of media bias, claiming that it is "pointless and repetitive" (Dennis 1997, 119). Others point out that even if there are fluctuations in news content, these fluctuations are not systematic. More important for them is that the "bias" can "almost always be explained by factors outside the ideological thinking of individual journalists" (Bennett 2003, 29). We disagree. It is our view that it is not just random variation that shows that some media coverage favours one side over the other. It is not merely press routines, availability of sources, and day-to-day events that determine the news. Journalists do influence news coverage and that coverage does move in a certain direction.

More broadly, we are concerned about the ability of the media to effect social change. Using a standard set of questions, we have taken a snapshot of journalists' beliefs and we compare them with those of the Canadian public. We then compare journalists' attitudes toward several public policy issues, along with a profile of how the mass media report on these questions. We look at both English- and French-speaking journalists in Canada; we examine

similarities and differences, the gap between the public and journalists when they are considered not only as groups but also as individuals.

The media are important not just because they facilitate the communication of the news but (according to media watchers, at least) because of what makes up the news – because of its content. By itself, the news does not exist: it comes into being because it is produced by the media. To that extent, the media are agents in society as well as transmission belts. Media analysts have said that the media change opinions, form opinions, and mould moral and social behaviour. In particular, television has been implicated in creating an increasingly violent society, a more tolerant society, and a more permissive society. Media critics and parents have worried whether the media condition young people to be more violent, and television has been linked to the decline of social capital in civil society and the growth of passivity. Whether any particular claim can, in fact, be confirmed may be secondary to the nearly unanimous view that the mass media play a major role in the lives of most North Americans. They are an essential constituent of modern life, at least to the extent that modern life would be something quite different in the absence of the media. Any number of public opinion polls have indicated that the public rely on and, more important, trust the news media to provide information on public policy issues. From the days of the Kent Commission (Canada 1981) to yesterday's Gallup Poll (Mazzuca 2001), television in particular has been regarded as the most popular means by which Canadians acquire news and information. Comparable data from the United States indicate the same reliance of the general population, the "mass public," on TV. Likewise, commentators, scholars, and analysts are nearly unanimous in the view that the media have been an important and growing component in what has come to be called the information age – the very term evokes the influence of the media. One thing seems certain: the media are in the middle of the political process. They claim to provide information to the public and shape the way people think about the world. Even if the degree to which the media shape the political agenda is open to debate, politicians and policy makers *believe* the media have an influence on public opinion. That belief influences the political process.

Even so, not everyone who studies the media thinks that journalists matter very much. According to the perspective adopted by these analysts, what counts is who owns the media, not who writes the story or who produces

the six o'clock news. We think that the views of journalists matter independently of who owns the media, so our first task is to show why.

CULTURAL CRITICS VERSUS LIBERAL PLURALISTS

Generally speaking, scholars use two models to examine the media. One, which we follow more or less faithfully in this book, holds that the power and the importance of the media lie in the media's ability to influence the formation and content of citizens' opinions. We may call this a liberal and pluralist perspective, because it assumes that public policy to some degree is the outcome of a more or less reasonable and multi-part conversation among citizens and political institutions to which they accord legitimacy.

The second approach, which well may command the allegiance of some university-based analysts, uses a model that places the media in a position of explicit social control: if you are concerned with the influence of the media, this approach says, find out who owns what. We will call this the cultural critical approach on the grounds that most of the practitioners describe themselves as being engaged in "critical theory," or "cultural criticism," or some other variety of discourse analysis or semiotics that can trace an intellectual pedigree back, eventually, to the work of Karl Marx.

One could also designate these cultural critics as Marxist, provided one bears in mind that we are dealing not with a tightly disciplined doctrinal sect so much as a common strategy devoted to the unmasking of the lineaments of power. Within that general interpretive strategy a number of distinct approaches are provided. Characteristically, however, cultural critics direct their attention to elite organizations, and therefore focus a significant amount of their analysis on media owners. When they do examine journalists, their focus is less on the individuals' ideological beliefs and more on how the journalistic system affects the individuals' work. When ideology is examined, the focus is on the journalistic routines and the ruling system (Shoemaker and Reese 1991, 183-207).

On the other side, many liberal pluralists for the most part ignore who holds power; they assume that journalists are responsible for the words they write and for choosing the sources they interview for their stories. For pluralists, society is an array of competing ideas and groups. They think it is certainly possible for there to be unanimity of opinion and even a dominant

opinion, but it is highly unlikely that one view or one individual will dominate all the time. Moreover, liberal pluralists are of the view that the autonomy of the media from the state, from business, and from interest groups is real, not formal or empty. Thus pluralists argue that the question of media ownership is separate from managerial control of media content, and that journalists are relatively independent with respect to how they write their stories. This does not preclude the possibility that, if a journalist persistently or even deliberately wrote or produced stories that owners found offensive, he or she could be informed of the displeasure of the boss or even fired. It does, however, take issue with the assumption of the cultural critics and Marxists that journalists are either toadies of the bosses or out of work; it says this is not self-evidently true, despite the undoubted occurrence of confirming instances.

More specifically, we disagree with one of the major governing assumptions of conventional Marxism: that capitalist society is characterized by class domination and class struggle, so that the media are part of a larger and more general system of social control. The apparent plurality of views in a democracy, according to the Marxists, is a sham. The rhetoric of a plurality of voices and, indeed, the model of a conversation for them simply masks the fact that the media in capitalist countries serve the “corporate state.” That is what counts. The public accepts the domination of the corporate state only because of the approval by the media, which are also owned by big conglomerates. Moreover the trend, and also therefore the undesirability, has been enhanced in recent years by “convergence” (Gerbner et al. 1996).

Convergence refers to the same media organizations holding control in different media outlets. It includes cross-ownership, such as a newspaper chain owning television stations. Increasingly it has also come to mean news companies owning entertainment and Internet companies. In short, the media, and much else, are nothing but “superstructure”; the reality, say the Marxists, is exploitive capitalism. The role of the media in capitalist society is to induce and support antirevolutionary “false consciousness.” Whatever one may think of the insights provided by this approach and of the logic employed to obtain them, it is a venerable tradition that extends back to the writings of Marx himself (Marx 1843).

In part, the Marxist approach and the cultural critical school derived from it were an understandable reaction to what James Curran (1990, 137) called

the “American domination” of the media studies field, “with what seemed to many of us at the time as its sterile consensus, its endless flow of repetitive and inconclusive ‘effects’ studies situated in a largely ‘taken-for-granted’ pluralist model of society, and instead to generate a debate that reflected the diversity of European intellectual thought.”

The diversity of European thought that Curran and several others had in mind was strongly influenced by the orthodox Marxist notion of false consciousness as well as the initially more heterodox, though increasingly respectable, doctrine of “hegemony” developed by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. A hegemonic class, according to him, is the source of an order diffused throughout civil society in such a way that it informs all taste, morality, and custom, and every ethical and religious principle – in short, all social relations that have an intellectual or moral dimension. Marx’s version was simpler: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” It follows, Marx said, that “the class that has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx and Engels 1932, 172).

Likewise, Ralph Miliband (1969), a British Marxist, maintained that the “engineering of consent” about which Gramsci wrote was the business of private enterprise. By this argument, cultural institutions are a product of civil or bourgeois society. The role of the media is to report on the dominant institutions and figures of society. Marxist intellectuals have argued that the media focus on official commentary, the words provided by presidents, prime ministers, government, and business agencies, all of which invariably reinforce the hegemony of the capitalist system. They assume, for example, that the stratification (and not the mobility) of North American society means that the interests of the ruling class are bound to be in opposition to the majority of the population, those who are ruled. Since Marxists assume that politics is concerned with negotiating interests, they conclude that there exists a “contradiction” between the interests of the rulers and the ruled that must be explained.

Often the “contradiction” is described in an alarming way, as a danger to democratic governance. For example, Robert McChesney, in the Preface to *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (1999, ix), declared there was a contradiction

“between a for-profit, highly concentrated, advertising-saturated, corporate media system and the communication requirements of a democratic society.” McChesney was concerned with American ownership concentration, where the largest fifteen chains owned about a quarter of the newspapers; in Canada, 95 percent of the papers are owned by a half-dozen chains (Lorimer and Gasher 2001; Compaine 2000). For those who focus on ownership, then, the danger to Canadian democracy is even greater than in the United States.

Typically at this point in the argument, critical media theorists invoke the notion of hegemony to account for the ability of rulers to manage the contradiction. “The ruling class,” wrote Robert Hackett (1991, 53), for example,

needs to win allies and to maintain substantial popular consent with consent from below. On the one hand, the major agencies of ideological control (such as schools, churches, and the media) tend actively – though not necessarily deliberately – to disseminate dominant ways of understanding the world. So hegemony involves the permeation throughout most of North American society of a whole system of values, attitudes, beliefs, and morality that in one way or another supports the established order and the class interests that dominate it. On the other hand, ordinary people themselves accept the hegemonic ideology: It becomes enmeshed with the “common sense” through which people make their lives and their world intelligible.

The assumption guiding so many of the Marxist, Marx-inspired, or as the French say, *marxisant*, studies of the media is that the crucial factor is ownership. Ownership is the index by which power is indicated and deployed to manage the social and political contradictions of a capitalist society (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 592; Clement 1975, 287ff).

It is true enough that there has been a long-term trend in concentration of newspaper ownership in Canada (Kesterton 1967; Desbarats 1996). In late 1995 Hollinger Incorporated, led by Conrad Black, increased its Canadian newspaper holdings from a small chain of low-circulation papers to a chain that owned 56 percent of the newspapers in the country, accounting for 41 percent of newspaper circulation (Saunders et al. 1996). In response, many commentators voiced their deep anxieties about the consequences for democracy in Canada (Driedger 1996; Flavelle 1996; Barlow and Winter 1997).

An editorial in the left-wing *Canadian Dimension* was typical: “The effect [of the expansion of the newspaper holdings of Hollinger] is to viciously narrow the range of public debate, advancing corporate ideals while suffocating dissenting voices” (1996, 4). The remedy, at least for the anxious, was to pass laws regulating ownership concentration.

Similar proposals have been made in the past. In 1970, the Davey Committee proposed a press ownership review board (Canada 1970). In 1981, the Kent Commission proposed a Canadian newspaper act that would compel divestiture. As the commissioners said on the opening page of their report, “Freedom of the press is not a property right of owners. It is a right of the people. It is part of their right to free expression, inseparable from their right to inform themselves. The Commission believes that the key problem posed by its terms of reference is the limitation of those rights by undue concentration of ownership and control of the Canadian newspaper industry” (Canada 1981, 1). The recommendations of both the Davey Committee and the Kent Commission were never turned into law, largely because Canadians and their governments considered bureaucratic regulation to be a greater threat to a free press than concentration of ownership.

A study by Soderlund and Hildebrandt (2001) indicates that, despite the undoubted anxiety of critics, there is no evidence that the effects of Hollinger’s acquisition impaired or threatened the existence of a free press in Canada. The study consisted of a “before and after” content analysis of a dozen papers, some of which were acquired by Hollinger, and some of which were not and so served as a control group. The question Soderlund and Hildebrandt examined was simple: did Hollinger, personified by Conrad Black, change the tone of his new papers to reflect his own opinions? They concluded,

Contrary to the expectations advanced by critical theorists, our assessment (based on an analysis of their content over a six-year period) is that while changes in content and evaluation in these newspapers did take place, on balance, the thrust of the critical school hypotheses cannot be confirmed ... Our findings appear best described as *inconsistent* ... In some instances data confirmed critical expectations, in others they disconfirmed predicted trends, but in most instances they were simply inconclusive. Furthermore, in many instances, trends (both confirming and disconfirming hypothesized changes) were also evident in the various control papers, thus calling into question

whether ownership change was in fact the primary driving force behind the discovered change, suggesting instead that there were other factors, either industry-wide or specific to different regions or provinces, at work ... we found ... first, that while there were changes in content, not all that many of these changes were statistically significant. Second, for those changes that were statistically significant, not all moved in the same direction, nor could they reasonably be seen to follow discernable and consistent patterns. Finally, statistically significant changes tended to be found just about as often in papers which did not change owners as in those that did.

The reason why the anxieties of the cultural critics are misplaced is that newspapers are not just sources of information. They are businesses that must make profits for their owners and shareholders if they are to keep operating. Even the Kent Commission noticed this rather elementary reality (Hallman et al. 1981) and it has been confirmed many times (Demers 1996, 1999; Atkinson 1997). In the language of Soderlund and Hildebrandt, the kind of owner that would emerge after the Hollinger acquisitions – personified as “Conrad Black the committed ideologue or Conrad Black the shrewd businessman” – was never really in doubt.

Cultural critics, however, are not looking for mere empirical evidence of inconclusive effects. If the facts are not dramatic, they can be ignored (as the Curran quotation earlier in this chapter would have us believe) – or rather, they can be dismissed as being entirely unnecessary. As the Hackett quotation, also earlier in this chapter, indicates beyond doubt, an approach such as that followed by the cultural critics contains no requirement to show – by actually demonstrating their control of the content of communication – *how* media moguls exercise their alleged rule. It is enough to know that, by definition, they must exercise such control even when the evidence is non-existent or inconclusive. Such an approach certainly simplifies media research. It also provides a ready-made model to account for all the other institutions of capitalist society. As with the operation of the media, there is no need to show how schools or churches operate to reinforce capitalism by careful empirical analysis of what they actually say or do.

It is our position that the notion of a necessary influence of media ownership on media content ought to be treated as a scientifically testable hypothesis rather than revealed and self-evident dogma. In fact, as we shall see,

if ever in modern history the schools, the churches, and the media could plausibly be treated as elements of a unifying ruling structure, which is questionable, in modern society it is abundantly clear that they have grown further apart.

As an example of the failure of the critical school to engage in empirically testing their theories, communications scholar Thelma McCormack claimed in 1983 that the Canadian news media marginalized social movements: “But for those dissident social movements that are partially mobilized – feminists, environmentalists, peace movement people – the problem of access is different. On the one hand, it is non-recognition, and, on the other, it is a form of recognition that either discredits or trivializes the movements” (McCormack 1983, 469). These remarks were not based on any examination of the content of the news or on interviews with journalists. They were simply declared, *ex cathedra*, to be fact.

Even when cultural critics rely on quantitative data to support an assertion, they refer to non-empirical criticism to provide context. For example, sociologist Michael Clow found that from 1975 to 1983 the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail* marginalized the anti-nuclear movement. His conclusion was that *all* media treated the movement the same way, and that this was *typical* of how other social movements were treated by the press. At the start of his concluding chapter he stated that “Nuclear coverage is not an aberration from how social movements are generally treated” (Clow 1993, 91), and cited McCormack as an authority. Indeed, he elaborated McCormack’s unsubstantiated opinion with the claim that “whether the subject is the environment, Free Trade, the Gulf War or women’s issues, news coverage in the mainstream press seldom coherently reports the views of those who stand outside the ‘common sense’ of business and the political parties” (Clow 1993, 91). In fact, McCormack had provided no evidence to support the point Clow wished to make. Moreover, both her comments and the focus of his own study predate the North American Free Trade Agreement and the 1991 Gulf War.

Perhaps even more misleading is the effect of the highly abstract language favoured by practitioners of the cultural critical approach and by Marxists. In the Hackett quotation given earlier, the author argued that schools, churches, and the media tend “actively ... to disseminate dominant ways of

understanding the world.” The assumption seems to be that these social institutions somehow, and necessarily, provide ways of understanding the world so that no framework or conceptualization is needed to show how this alleged control is actually exercised. If institutions do the work, there is no need to acknowledge that people make up institutions.

As communications professor James Winter (1997, xvii) put it, “if individuals were factored into the analysis, then there would have to be some acknowledgement of individual differences.” To acknowledge individual differences, however, would divert attention from the inexorable significance of institutions and “the system.” Even worse, a focus on “individual differences” – which is to say, a focus on what actual journalists actually mean – would necessarily raise questions about the integrity of the hypothetical but also inevitable “huge monolithic system.” Anyone working in the media who is not a willing participant in the huge monolithic system is, according to the argument of the cultural critics, necessarily marginalized as a “good journalist” engaged in an endless but also futile struggle.

Likewise there is no need for anyone such as Hackett to examine how schools, churches, and the media disseminate the “dominant” or ruling way of understanding the world. He provides no analysis of a single school curriculum. He is silent about the content of the dominant “ideology” of the churches, which are assumed to be homogeneous. Indeed, all organizations are treated as like minded. That North American society boasts different types of schools (secular, religious, private, public) and a variety of religious or spiritual leanings (Judaism, Buddhism, paganism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, “Eastern,” and New Age, to name but a few), and that there are competing media organizations (private broadcasting, public broadcasting, chain newspapers, family newspapers, Internet publications, private publishers, and so forth) is majestically ignored.

The issue here is not one of empirical rigour, about which ferocious methodological controversies might swirl, but of an obliviousness to reality that ordinary common sense cannot ignore. Moreover, to common sense it seems tedious to have to point out that different organizations – the Catholic Church and most business organizations, for example – have very different positions, interests, and purposes. Contrast, for example, the mission statement of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce with that of the Canadian

Catholic Bishops. The main theme of the Catholic Church with respect to society is not one of capitalism and growth in prosperity and material wealth, but practically the opposite – social progress demands the government-directed redistribution of income. In contrast, the dominant ideology of most businesses is to make money for their owners or shareholders. How these contradictory positions illustrate a single ideology is not obvious. However strong the belief of Hackett and others of his persuasion (for Hackett is merely typical) that North American society can be reduced to a single interest and a single ideology, in the end the multiracial, multi-ethnic, and multidimensional social reality simply contradicts this opinion.

This is not to proclaim the dogmatic contrary, that there are no shared interests among journalists or that they have no common ideology. But it is not self-evident that politics is simply about interests, nor is it yet proven what the ideology of journalists might be or even whether their views are coherent enough to constitute an ideology in any meaningful sense. Even less has it been shown that this same reputed ideology is shared by media owners, other business people, religious leaders, educators, and so on.

Interestingly enough, when one reverses the logic of Marxist critical inquiry the results are no more satisfying. For example, Clement (1975, 125) argued that if one examined the way the Canadian “corporate elite” lived, it turned out that they gathered together in close-knit social circles: “They preside over the corporate world, using as their means of power, the central institutions of the Canadian economy – 113 dominant corporations, their subsidiaries, affiliates, investments, interlocking directorships with smaller corporations, family ties and shared class origins.” So, of course, do the people who toil for the 113 dominant corporations gather in close-knit social circles with shared class origins. The language might be quaint – “113 dominant corporations” sounds a lot like Social Credit anxieties of the 1930s about the “50 big shots” – and the nature of Clement’s information somewhat dated, but the logic could be applied today to formal and informal relationships among working people.

In 1996, for example, Statistics Canada’s Labour Force Survey showed that roughly one-third of the Canadian workforce belongs to a union. That number increases significantly within certain occupations. Teachers and nurses are unionized to the 50 percent level. Three-quarters of public-sector employees

belong to a union. Though only 26 percent of all journalists in Canada are union members, an additional 28.5 percent are covered by a union agreement (Akyeampong 1997, 45-54). The rate of unionization among journalists is underrepresented because the Labour Force Survey did not differentiate between self-described journalists and those in full-time employment. Full-time staff at the CBC, for example, and at most other television stations, are completely unionized. Similarly, newspaper staff are increasingly becoming part of the union membership. In Quebec, unionism is even stronger than in English-speaking Canada. Such statistical profiles are, naturally, interesting enough by themselves. But what, if anything, does it imply about the influence union membership has on the way journalists produce news?

According to the logic of the cultural critics and to the dialectical determinations of Marxism, journalists must either promote their union ideology in their work or suffer from "false consciousness." There are, of course, plenty of examples of where journalists use the rhetoric of their unions in their daily work. For example, in a CBC *Newsworld* (2 March 1999) interview with economist John Crispo on unionism in Canada, host Ben Chin quoted from his own union in questioning his guest: "To borrow a slogan from our own union, 'It's our turn.'" The unusual nature of union membership, as distinct from other social arrangements, is that unions overtly and deliberately try to influence their members on public policy issues. In this case at least, we have an example of a journalist using the information and rhetoric provided by his union to direct the questions to his interviewee. The real issue is, however, whether union membership leads to the widespread and systematic advocacy of union views.

Our data indicate that union membership alone no more provides an adequate account of the information presented in the news than do ownership patterns. Even so, the social relations of journalists, especially their union relations, have not been acknowledged in studies that focused on ownership. As a result, the effects of unionization on media organizations (if any) have gone unreported and so have been ignored.

Noam Chomsky, perhaps the best-known media analyst of the cultural critical school, has developed a complex propaganda model of the media. According to him, the way to understand the way news is produced and delivered is to examine the tried-and-true issue of ownership concentration; the

reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and experts who are funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; and what he calls “flak,” which refers to the existence of groups that monitor and criticize the media (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 2). In his opinion, corporations fund flak groups in order to ensure that the media are forced to provide a market perspective.

In Canada, however, there are far more media-monitoring organizations that self-identify with the left than there are those who admire markets. One website devoted to helping journalists find story angles and sources on the Internet lists only the “flak” agencies on the left.² In introducing Julian Sher as the producer of JournalismNet, the CBC’s Alison Smith said it was a website that many of those at CBC use (NewsMedia@CBC, 20 December 1998).

One obvious reason why the cultural critical school fails to resonate outside its own circles is that listing the holdings of media owners does not prove they control anything. The assumption that connects media ownership to media control has been cast into doubt by the anecdotal evidence provided even by adversarial journalists who question the existing pluralist social system and offer alternative solutions. Cultural critics have tried to brush aside such contrary evidence by dismissing it as indicating only “individual transgressions against dominant values (constitutional democracy, patriotism, national security, and so on) which are themselves taken for granted” (Hackett 1991, 83). But even individual transgressions contradict the dogma of a monistic ideology.

In any case, empirical studies show that values cannot be taken for granted by the media and that in fact members of the media are at the forefront of changing those values and ideals. Indeed, the evidence shows precisely that because values have shifted so dramatically over the past century they cannot possibly be taken for granted.

Statements alleging the media are a monolithic, undifferentiated group that “disseminate dominant ways of understanding” have been made without the benefit of information regarding what is actually being said and by whom. In order to determine what “ways of understanding” are in fact being disseminated, it is necessary to question individuals within media organizations who are in a position to make decisions about what counts as news.

It is all very well for cultural critics, critical theorists, and so on to draw links between the powerful and the media conglomerates, but it is also important to assess critically the views of people who actually make the day-to-day decisions. In the following chapter we address the even more basic question of why the news matters, and how the impact of the news on citizens in constitutional democracies has been examined.