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# REDEFINING MEDIA

David Koch

An ad for "International Right to Know Day" recently plastered the cover of an entire section of the *Globe and Mail*. The large font text was mostly blacked out, slashed by the pen of a censor. The reverse side explained, "Right to Know is a principle that states citizens have the right to free, timely access to information on what our government is doing." The *Globe's* ad waxed on the vital role of newspapers for democracy in their trusty-watchdog role – a critical monitor of the powerful. More specifically, a check on governments. Certainly, free expression is essential to democracy, and should be protected from a secretive or oppressive state. But there's something missing from the "Right to Know" ad, and to find out what it is, we may need to look beyond the mainstream media.

Here, I am defining 'media' broadly, including broadcasting, narrowcasting, print, internet, satellite and all manner of technologies that convey ideas and information. In this piece, however, I will deal especially with news media. Mainstream news media in Canada includes the state-owned CBC and a few, much larger corporations: BGM, CanWest Global, Quebecor, and Rogers. Largely, these companies have singular control on newspapers (BGM owns the *Globe and Mail*), radio stations (Rogers owns dozens of them), TV net-

works (CanWest owns *Global Television*), publishers (Quebecor is the world's biggest printing company), and so on. These companies may appear large to Canadians, but Marc Raboy and David Taras commented that "[b]ecause Canadian media companies are tiny by international standards and must compete with global giants such as Time Warner and News Corporation, the government and the CRTC (Canada's telecommunication, radio, and TV regulator) have allowed Canadian companies to gain the size and buying power needed to have some chance of competing."

So, if private Canadian media corporations dwarf the CBC Radio One, CanWest is nothing compared to General Electric, which owned 28 TV stations in the US as of 2003, or Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which owned 60. In the US, by 2003, the five biggest media conglomerates, deeply interconnected through common board members, controlled 75 percent of all prime-time American television. The best data available in this regard may date back to the 1970s, according to Harold R. Kerbo. It shows, for example, that the ABC network has been directly connected, through at least one common board member, to IBM, General Motors, Citibank and many other top corporations.

Kerbo argued that US media – which is almost en-

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ronment, but one where the wealthy and corporations can exert their influence to limit what is seen and heard. This seems to be the case in Canada as well. Distracted by the bottom line, big media distort 'the facts' and crowd out critical voices. But media activists are resisting and challenging this trend. CKUT Radio – the campus community radio station at McGill University – recently held a conference called "ReDefining Media: Media Democracy and Community Radio," with a stringent assertion that critical voices won't be silenced – but they do need to be amplified.

### Dominant currents

Media companies in Canada and abroad require a constant supply of advertising dollars to remain profitable, making news outlets hyper-sensitive to advertisers' interests. The information 'traffic' keeps moving, but the air is turning to smog. Part of the problem is that the distinction between newsrooms and marketing departments is becoming more and more vague, according to scholar and former journalist Doug Underwood. He quoted a onetime reporter for the *Arizona Republic*: "What happens in that climate – when marketing and advertising become more important than copy – is that you begin to find you can't do anything controversial and count on management to stick by you." Newspapers that allow advertising to determine the news prioritize moneyed interests over voices of dissent. Without the free 'clash of ideas' that is essential to democracy, there is an artificial harmony.

But advertising is only one element within a complex of concerted forces. As more media outlets become the assets of fewer corporations, the diversity of the voices disseminated across the public sphere becomes homogenized. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which includes more than 175 newspapers, Fox Television, satellite networks, and much more, has been accused of manipulating his vast empire to push a political agenda – all his newspapers, for example, were in support of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Closer to home, CanWest Global – an expansive TV network and a chain of newspapers that includes

all major dailies in the Victoria/Vancouver market – reportedly imposed *thirteen* on its papers misinformational policies such as contentiously declaring certain Arab groups 'terrorists.'

### ReDefining Media

*Without doubt, the struggle for communication rights is one of the most important democratizing struggles of the current era.*

-Robert A. Hackett and William K. Carroll

Given its importance of media in constructing public opinions on everything from school board reforms to foreign policy, it must be more than a tool for the elite. The role of alternative media as a *democratic* alternative was put into relief at the ReDefining Media conference. But the concept of "media democracy" is contentious, as scholar and CKUT Board of Directors member Darin Barney noted: "most liberals associate democracy with property rights and so conceive of any regulatory efforts to limit media concentration as an 'undemocratic' violation of those rights," including "the right to own as many [media outlets] as you damn well please." Against this liberalist view, Barney argued that if democracy is the fundamental equality of all persons, then media democracy is "that condition in which media institutions and practices at least strive to embody the substantive principle of equality." From this perspective, the current media system is deeply undemocratic by privileging sources and perspectives of the elite.

But media activists are fighting for parity in the public sphere, where a wider range of voices can be heard. Hackett and Carroll distinguish "four major strands of praxis" among media activists in North America and Britain:

1. "influencing content and practices of mainstream media" – for example, the media watchdogs at NewsWatch Canada monitor the diversity and thoroughness of Canadian news coverage, and their 'top-ten' lists of underreported stories have attracted the attention of big media.

*fourteen* 2. "advocating for reform of government policy/regulation" – in this vein, Canadians for Democratic Media has campaigned against the increased concentration of media ownership.

3. "changing the relationship between audiences and media" – here, media education and 'culture jamming', which create commentary on media through media, are seminal examples.

4. "building independent, democratic and participatory media" – CKUT, and the very journal you are holding are instances of critical and diverse perspectives which offer a resistance to media hegemony.

At ReDefining Media, Gretchen King, Community News Coordinator at CKUT, discussed Direct Action Radio – radio as a tool for activists to challenge the status quo. The Homelessness Marathon does this by allowing the poor and homeless to take back the airwaves for fourteen hours straight, creating a discussion on poverty that is transmitted across the country. The consciousness-raising Homelessness Marathon "was originated by a community broadcaster in New York State who was essentially at a loss for why there was so much poverty and homelessness in the states and there was no public discussion about it," King said. The result was a radio show that broadcasted through a New York winter night.

"[The broadcaster] facilitated a live talk show, inviting people to call in who were homeless, have been homeless, inviting poor people to call in and make their voices heard, to take that space in the media, that the media never allows them to take," King said. She has been coordinating Montreal's Homelessness Marathon – the first of its kind in Canada – since 2003. NewsWatch Canada has identified poverty and social inequality as one of the top under-reported areas in Canada's press. Giving a boost of volume to an inaudible struggle, the Marathon elicits a much-needed narrative from the sub-zero streets of Montreal. And makes it heard: the transmission reached more than thirty-six stations this year.

I emailed King, asking about the political implications of democratic media. In King's estimation, they include "turning this society upside down, so that the world's wealthiest 1% will NO longer control 99% of

the resources (including the media), and creating a revolution in the media (print, TV, and radio) so that it is no longer *THEM* representing *US*, but rather *US* representing *OURSELVES*" (her emphasis). If this seems hard to imagine, consider the words of Amy Goodman, host of the independent news program *Democracy Now!*, but also a prominent author, investigative journalist and the show's producer. Appropriately enough, Goodman was the keynote speaker at ReDefining Media. On the importance of media for social movements, she em-

phasized the importance of seeing the world through a media framed with something "other than a corporate lens", and amplified without "a corporate microphone." "The media are the most powerful institutions on Earth. They are the way we come to understand the world and the way the rest of the world comes to understand us.... That is why CKUT is so important. It is part of a global, grassroots media network that is beginning to coalesce. And it's more critical than ever. We need independent media in a time of war." Goodman's connection between media and war is apt; when considering the current state of global affairs, the power of media as a tool of resistance and change cannot be overstated.

But local conflicts are equally suppressed, and it is the task of alternative channels to explode a community's self-image. At a panel on Human Rights Journalism and Youth Radio, Mostafa Henaway – activist and host and producer of CKUT's Tuesday Morning After show – explained that CKUT's programming has sought to be a voice for youth marginalized by the city. This includes "those who face the brunt of police brutality" in Montreal, which, Henaway pointed out, are the generally black and immigrant communities of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG), Côte-des-Neige, and Little Burgundy. He argued that racial profiling is 'rampant' in these communities – but just one aspect of a racially divided society. Street workers from Head and Hands – an NDG-based social agency which offers a range of support services for youth – had observed regular police harassment at Vendôme metro station in NDG. To address the problem, they proposed a broadcast from the metro station. The two-hour special edition of the (corporate-free) CKUT news program Off the Hour went live from Vendôme in July 2006. Henaway surveyed the solidarity fostered by the broadcast: "The people that came out, it was the


youth, it was the kids from NDG, it was Mothers United Against Racism (a group of women fighting racial discrimination), it was community workers, and they all came out and spoke out against that racial profiling”.

More than a dozen police officers had lined the entrance to the metro station when the radio crew arrived to set up their equipment. Anita, a street worker for Head and Hands, estimated that racial profiling at the station was positively impacted after the show. Persisting in their contestation of a racist police force which continues to abuse its power, they have since repeated the program with another broadcast. Certainly, the diffuse power of democratic media is not commensurable with gun-wielding officers, but the free expression of public grievances does advance the cause of equality in society, by collectively constructed and gradually felt increments of resistance and change.

These examples of active media democratization are but a fraction of a diverse and vibrant grassroots media, a mere sample of the fifty-plus speakers at ReInventing Media. Indeed, it is an exciting time for media activists. At ReDefining Media, Jooneed Khan, veteran international affairs reporter and analyst for La Presse, commented, “An amazing sea change is occurring, and it is happening at all levels. Government credibility is at its lowest. Media credibility is at its lowest – I mean mainstream media. And the whole balance of forces around the planet is undergoing an enormous shift.” Khan noted that while the ratings for Fox News have recently plunged, “alternative media, popular media is coming to the fore.” And even if a large part of the population is exposed to news and politics through conservative mainstream media, Barney pointed out that “alternative media will always remain a crucial source by which critical news, ideas and perspectives ‘bleed’ into the mainstream.”

### Opt for Alt Media

As mentioned, media activism includes building alternative media and other forms of praxis – this includes working to secure funding for alternative media, so it can remain buffered from pressures of the market and the state. McGill recently created a system allowing students to opt-out of the \$4 student fee that helps support

CKUT, a reminder of the financial precariousness of alternative media outlets *fifteen* (QPIRG-McGill, an important activist hub, is also subject to the new system). As a non-profit, CKUT depends on funding drives, limited advertising from low-cost ads, and student fees for its \$400,000 annual budget. The on-line opt-out could dwindle an important source of funds – student fees account for about a third of CKUT’s budget. Cash-strapped students may need to hold onto every cent they can, but if opt-outs are extensive enough, it poses an additional challenge to alternative media. At the time of publication, students are working to pass a motion with the Students Society of McGill University resolving to take action to end the on-line opt-out system. The ‘shopping-list’ effect of online opt-outs, which detract student’s recognition of autonomous student groups as vital elements of democracy and a common, public good, must be countered by promoting the station and, more generally, the need for alternative media – a need we all share, and cannot opt out of. 

*Get Involved!*

*Volunteer:*

CKUT: general orientation: Third Thursday of every month, 12 p.m., 3 p.m., and 6 p.m.

**Homelessness Marathon:** contact [marathon@ckut.ca](mailto:marathon@ckut.ca) for info.

*Also see:*

CKUT 90.3 FM: in Greater Montreal and 91.7 on cable, and you can listen online.

**Off the Hour:** 5-6 PM on weekdays

See “community news” and “programming and archives” at [www.ckut.ca](http://www.ckut.ca))

For a wide variety of grassroots audios see the **A-infos Radio Project:** <http://www.radio4all.net>

Hackett and Carroll, “CRITICAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND MEDIA REFORM” <http://www.sfu.ca/~hackett/CriticalSocial-Movements.htm>

Hackett, “TAKING BACK THE MEDIA: NOTES ON THE POTENTIAL FOR A COMMUNICATIVE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT” <http://www.sfu.ca/~hackett/takingbackthemedial.html>