

EBITDA-mocracy

How Canada's changing media threatens democracy

BY RUSSELL WANGERSKY

There is no real mass media in North Harbour, not unless you count the very simplest kind; the roadside sign that warns “Fox snares in area,” or the yellow and black provincial government signs that mark the rough corners of the domestic wood cutting areas.

Tucked into one corner of Newfoundland's St. Mary's Bay, it is a linear town, a handful – maybe three handfuls – of houses and one small store that run along one side of a narrow arm of the bay, a string of small beads on a long thread of road. The town is tucked down below Hat Pond, past the rocky black inflows of the North Harbour and Flinn Rivers – sudden, floody rivers that drain vast shallow basins of bog and low brush. The houses don't all line up; some face the shore of the bay and the three long fingers of wharves, while others sit iconoclastically and kitty-cornered, looking pointedly away from their neighbours. There are new bungalows and older homes boasting big, rectangular windows with old-fashioned, storm windows fastened on with carelessly over-painted hooks and eyes. There are, of course, abandoned houses, as there are almost everywhere in a province and – a country – feeling the uneven tug-of-war between urban and rural life.

Political intrigues are far away from the practical realities of life; it matters less what a Member of Parliament does, and more that crab caught in the most recent fishery are uniformly smaller than in past years and that there are more afflicted with the unnerving bitter crab disease, which turns the crab flesh milky and liquid.

In the fall of 2002, high water along the Flinn backed up with the sudden weight of a fall storm, the sort of localized storm that regularly rattles nearby Placentia with heavy rain and occasional thunder and then rolls, disgorging, across the spine of the peninsula towards North Harbour.

There is nothing abstract about the Flinn; as the water rose, it began to carry fallen trees and slash along its long, flat course, until the flotsam met the simple bridge of a highway culvert sideways at the North Harbour road and made its own dam.

The water rose level with the pavement and then began to flow across the road: the gravel on the downhill side was swept away first, and then the pavement simply fell in. Soon, there was nothing left except the denuded, four-foot-high corrugated culvert, standing alone

in the hole, perpendicular to where the road had run. The only road, cut as cleanly as string with scissors.

Nothing abstract indeed – it would have been a news story, in fact, a provincial highway cut by a heavy autumn storm, its residents cut off and wondering when they could expect their children to be able to return safely to school – except that it was one far enough geographically from the mainstream media that almost no one chose to cover it. One hundred and thirty kilometres or so from St. John’s, but it could as easily have been a thousand.

Unlike the Flinn, democracy is an abstract notion, and one that for large parts of our Canadian confederacy is growing more abstract and disconnected from its users with each passing year. The media should have a role to play in keeping democracy close, especially in a country as disparate as Canada, because the media could be the thread that connects the Canadian dots. But the media is failing in that role.

On the face of it, you’d think that the problem with the media started and ended with the obvious threats – threats like the one found near a bridge in Selma, Alabama, for instance.

Selma became famous as the start of the first protests that eventually led to the 1965 U.S. Voting Rights Act, the start of a march that was to stretch all the way to Montgomery, but which ended instead at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The bridge stands at the edge of Selma, and state troopers waited there to bludgeon, tear-gas and whip the marchers. Hundreds were arrested, on March 7, 1965, a day that, in the civil rights movement, became known as Bloody Sunday.

On March 7, 2002, 37 years to the day after Bloody Sunday, the Selma Times-Journal wrote about the news a Hyundai manufacturing plant might be coming to the area – but they didn’t talk about what taxpayers were offering the automaker. Instead, they wrote about why it would be better to stay silent.

“Big companies do not like pressure. They don’t like to be told where they should move, and they sure don’t like ordinary citizens like us telling them they’d better move to our community. Big companies like to do things their way. They like to visit communities like ours, eat at our restaurants and ask us how much money we can give them to help them build the plant...

“When media get involved, when members of the press ask questions and get pushy about details, big companies get angry. They ask the media to leave them alone. They ask state officials to stay quiet. And if state officials know what’s best, they do stay quiet.

“Some say the people and press over in Mississippi talked so much about Hyundai that Hyundai said ‘See ya.’ We can’t let that happen to us... So for now, we’ll remain quiet on Hyundai, just like every other media organization in Alabama should do.”

So what is the connection between Selma and North Harbour?

Well, it is the media and democracy.

But perhaps not in the way you are thinking.

In Selma, the media was afraid of driving money away, and chose deliberately to close its eyes – chose not to do what the media is supposed to do, to provide the information required for an informed democracy. It is such an obvious twisting of the nature of the media that it almost reads as an absurdity – but it is no different, in the long run, from the fate of the informed democracy in Canada.

In North Harbour, it is the lack of money that, more and more, keeps the media away. And while it is far less obvious than the sentiments outlined in a Selma editorial, it might be even more dangerous, because the result is the same; a lack of information for that informed democracy.

In Selma, at least you have a choice to disagree with the message, because as distasteful as it is, desire for money is right there in front of you. It’s an experience that happens here, too – as the amounts of revenue raised from advertisers increase and the amounts raised from subscribers decrease, smaller outlets are finding that advertisers have a much more powerful part, not in what does get covered, but in what does not. The Globe and Mail can afford to ignore the wishes of its advertisers – it’s not so easy for media outlets scrabbling by their fingertips.

For North Harbour, the problem is more insidious.

There, like in much of rural Canada, just as democracy is growing further away from the individual concerns of Canadian citizens, a homogenized, EBITDA-driven media is growing further away as well.

EBITDA? It’s an important term, the measuring-stick of many of the

concentrated private media that operate in Canada – it is the abbreviation for the accounting term “earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization.” It is supposed to be the new bottom line, one exempt from the vagaries of differing accounting measures, a level playing field for prospective owners and shareholders to examine the question of the relative profitability of substantially differing businesses.

The problem with the level playing field of EBITDA, especially as far as the media is concerned, is that the media’s own playing field in Canada is growing more and more uneven. The growing concentration of traditional media ownership and the broadening pool of other sources of information have created a strangely splintered media.

Perhaps the best comparison is that the pull of business is doing to the media exactly what the current economic downturn is doing to the airline industry and the airlines’ presence in small-town Canada – there is a drawing-in towards the centre that leaves the fringes behind.

The problem is, we are a country built along the fringes.

And for the media, a level playing field may satisfy corporate owners, but it actually does little to protect the flow of information. A newspaper owner might compare an operation in the Atlantic provinces to one in St. Catharines, Ontario, and suggest, as is often done in this industry, that costs and returns for similar-sized papers should be similar as well. It is a factor like the old Southam measure – one editorial employee for every 1,000 subscribers of your circulation.

So the media battles for the more cost-effective ground, be that smaller coverage areas or “converged” media, and more is done, perpetually with less. Even the country’s public broadcaster is not immune; national broadcasting, by and large, has trumped local coverage. Regional newscasts, like the one that serves North Harbour, make do with smaller time slots and a smaller budget – they, too, necessarily pull in towards the centre, and coverage defaults to that which can be done most cheaply and most easily.

At the same time, the audience thins across what appears to be a broader and broader river bed of available media sources, each with proportionately smaller resources. The water may run faster, but it is markedly shallower, too.

The great oddity is that, in our democracy, rural voters often have

a franchise that counts for more than their urban compatriots. One North Harbour vote means more to the chances of a federal politician than two votes in a Toronto district – yet, to the media, North Harbour has come to mean almost nothing at all. It is, by and larger, easier and cheaper to aim for the largest homogenous block of readers or viewers – and the problem there is that, as more and more stations or papers angle for what have become crucial demographic segments of our society, large portions of the population – large, geographically-spread portions of the population – are becoming disenfranchised, to the point that their voices are no longer heard.

Not because they choose to be silent, but because there is no one there to listen.

In Selma, the danger to democracy was the fact that money might be coming to town, money important enough that a community was willing to allow a democratic drawing of the blinds. In North Harbour, the danger is more that the lack of money has slowly drawn away any hope of directly informing its citizens – and surely, that damages our democracy just as much.

There is a real danger that our only remaining consistent thread might someday be dollars.

In North Harbour, the sheers twitch in the windows and people watch when you park beside the road and look out across the long flat silver bay. The ocean swells are clipped off sharply as they enter the foot of the bay, down past Dog Pond and the mouth of the Big Barrisway River, so the only waves that make their way to your feet are small, lapping curls that fall over their own feet at the beach. There is no reason to be concerned if Paul Martin is placing his vast shipping holdings in a blind trust or handing them over to his sons; the fact is, neither the concept of conflict of interest nor the vast size of the Martin holdings make any sense to someone who has spent the morning sanding the bottom of his cradled fishing boat. Dogs bark, and you can hear the solid thunk of someone splitting wood.

And in a real way, North Harbour is just as cut off as if the Flinn were still overflowing its banks, undercutting the pavement and sucking the road gravel of that one fine thread of road far out into a deep and waiting sea.