

*The Dalton  
Camp Award*

2005



WINNING ESSAY BY

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Judging democracy by its weakest link:  
when *here* becomes their

# Judging democracy by its weakest link: when *here* becomes their

BY MEGAN WENNBURG

CANADIANS VIEW DEMOCRACY AS WE VIEW VAST OPEN SPACES, RUGGED MOUNTAIN RANGES, DEEP FORESTS AND ENDLESS OCEAN. IT IS AN INHERENT PART OF OUR LANDSCAPE THAT IS EASILY TAKEN FOR GRANTED, BUT NEVER COMPLETELY IGNORED. WE UNDERSTAND DEMOCRACY AS AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT DENOTING CERTAIN FREEDOMS THAT, ALONG WITH HUMOUR AND POLITENESS, HELP SHAPE OUR NATIONAL IDENTITY.

Democracy gets little airtime in the mind of the average Canadian until it is threatened. In recent years, the threat has been growing. It is evident in an unprecedented concentration of media ownership by a small number of corporations, including Bell Globemedia and CanWest Global Communications Corp.<sup>1</sup>

Media concentration does not signify the end of democracy, but it limits the diversity of voices fundamental to a healthy democratic society. Across the country, ownership wars are waging between independent publications and the corporations who seek to obtain them. One such battle was recently fought, and lost, in Saint John, New Brunswick.

## A SAD DAY FOR SAINT JOHN

On October 28, 2004, residents of Saint John, New Brunswick woke up to the news that *here* newspaper, the province's only alternative weekly, had been bought by the Irving family, the province's most powerful corporate entity with industries spanning oil and forestry, real estate and newspapers. *here* was now in the crowded company of every English-language daily paper in the province, as well as the numerous weeklies, periodicals and radio stations owned by Brunswick News, Irving's media arm.<sup>2</sup> As news of the sale spread, an angry tide of frustration and disbelief swept the phone lines, web forums and street corners from Quispamsis to Grand Bay and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

It's no wonder people were upset. Saint John is a small city on the Fundy Coast known for beautiful heritage buildings, fog, backwards water, the Irvings, and a doggedly unpretentious nature. It does not conjure images of vibrant cultural life, booming economic growth or outstanding intellectual achievement. And yet, for four and a half years Saint John was able to do what few contemporary cities of its size have done: sustain an independent alternative newspaper.

*here* was born in April 2000 as a love letter to the city of Saint John. In choosing to start an independent paper, *here's* creators (Mark Leger, Janet Scott and Judith Mackin) told the legions of Saint Johners situated

outside the scope of traditional news coverage that their stories were important and people would care about reading them. *here* sought to provide an alternative source of news, and to offer fresh perspectives on the community's social, political, economic and cultural life. But most importantly, *here* challenged Saint Johners to care about themselves and their city.

People responded. Beginning as a bi-weekly publication, copies of *here* were snatched off newsstands in a frenzy of anticipation, and dog-eared copies littered the city market, coffee shops and bars. Readers approached *here's* editor and writers on the street seeking conversation and continued debate, and young people began talking more about the issues affecting their city.

As a beginning publication, *here* wasn't always good – like many new business ventures it got off to a sputtery start – but locals were quick to forgive lapses in quality (writing, layout, photography) for the promise of what *here* represented in spirit. *here* was young; it was liberal; and, most importantly, it was independent.

Irving is the largest non-government employer in New Brunswick, and employs roughly eight percent of the workforce in Saint John.<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Colin (K.C.) Irving moved the company's operations from Bouctouche to Saint John in 1924, and Saint John is home to a number of major Irving operations, including a famously foul-smelling pulp mill and Canada's largest oil refinery. Saint John and neighbouring Rothesay are also home to several of the Irvings themselves.

Forbes magazine estimates the Irving family's wealth at \$4.4 billion US, making theirs the 117th largest fortune in the world.<sup>5</sup> In a province and city so firmly dominated by one economic power, the need to feel independent boils fiercely beneath the skin.

*here* tapped this passion when it began publishing in Saint John five years ago, and it sought to continue in this vein when it expanded into Moncton last spring, with plans to move into Fredericton as well.<sup>6</sup> In an interview in Rothesay on March 26, 2005, *here* co-founder and former editor Mark Leger (he resigned February 10 and *here* was still without a full time editor at the end of March) explained the expansion as a decision grounded both in financial necessity and in the desire to unite New Brunswick's three major centres with one strong alternative voice.

Issues of *here* are now published in all three cities, but they are no longer independent. In what he calls a "strategic error," Leger says *here's*

owners underestimated Irving's reaction when *here* moved to Moncton, the headquarters of Brunswick News. Within five weeks of the paper appearing on Moncton streets, Brunswick News had launched its own alternative weekly, Metro Marquee.<sup>7</sup>

According to Leger, the Marquee fought aggressively to secure advertisers, offering heavily discounted or free ad space. Boasting considerably deeper pockets than *here's* four owners (Leger, Janet Scott, Judith Mackin and Stephen Yaffe), Brunswick News made it next to impossible for *here* to compete. "We looked at their ad rates the first week [Metro Marquee] came out," says Leger, "and said 'we can't do it. We can't print the paper for that.'"

Opting to sell rather than face financial ruin, *here's* owners approached numerous organizations, other publications and the federal and provincial government, but, says Leger, "nobody was going to buy into that paper knowing the Irvings were trying to take it down." Swallowing their pride, *here's* owners approached Brunswick News about buying the paper, and on the afternoon of October 28 they signed ownership of *here* over to Brunswick News Inc.

Seven months after expanding into Moncton on April 1, *here* surrendered to the competition. In an attempt to ease the blow, Brunswick News management (including vice-president of Brunswick News Victor Mlodecki and Al Hogan, *here's* new general manager under Brunswick News) assured Leger "things would stay essentially the same."

A joint press release issued by *here* and Brunswick News on October 29 states: "Brunswick News has promised to carry on *here's* tradition of offering a fresh perspective on local issues. The new management group also recognizes the newspaper's solid name and reputation and will build on this by replacing Moncton's weekly newspaper, the Metro Marquee, with *here*."<sup>8</sup>

Despite assurances, the paper has changed significantly. On a structural level, Brunswick News switched from a 'full-time model' to a 'freelance model,' whereby writers lose job security but the publication saves money. As another cost-saving measure, *here's* Saint John office recently moved from its centrally located uptown accommodations into the basement of the Telegraph Journal (the Irving owned daily) building. Irving also owns its own press, and Brunswick News is able to print papers for significantly less than the fees paid by *here* when it was independent.<sup>9</sup>

According to Leger, Brunswick News is also keen to "merge promo-

tions and advertising with editorial in a way I'd never witnessed before." The day before production for *here's* December 9 issue, Leger says a senior editor for Brunswick News contacted him with instructions to run a cover story on the band Sum 41. The band wasn't scheduled to play at the Moncton Coliseum until February, but it appears that Brunswick News was more interested in helping SRO Entertainment Ltd. sell advance tickets than in running a relevant story.<sup>10</sup>

Leger refused to run the ad/cover. "When I behaved as an editor protective of his product they backed down," says Leger. But a story on Sum 41 written by Canadacast News Service ("people looking for a seat may want to consider buying themselves an early Christmas gift or adding them to their holiday wish list.") appeared in the December 9 issue of Moncton's *here* all the same.<sup>11</sup> Calling this incident an example of the "natural give and take between editor and publisher," Leger says the responsibility for determining content ultimately comes down to the strength of the editor.

But an editor can only do so much, and in the case of *here's* sex column Leger found himself trapped in a losing battle.<sup>12</sup> "They decided to kill the sex column before they bought the paper," says Leger. "But they didn't tell me." According to Leger, the decision to chop it came straight from J.D. Irving (president of J.D. Irving Ltd, Irving's forestry, food processing and transportation arm) himself.

While *here's* sex column was hardly a shining beacon of exemplary journalism, it acted like a canary in the coal mine confirming readers' worst fear: The Irvings directly control what goes in their papers. This isn't necessarily the case – "they don't seek to overtly control the news," says Leger – but by getting their knickers in a censorial knot over sex advice, readers felt the chill of corporate interference.

"The end of the sex column isn't the end of the day," says Leger, "but readers think if J.D. ends that, what else is he doing? It kills readers' faith. And I couldn't get them [Brunswick News management] to get that. They'd be, like, 'That slippery slope, that's silly.' But readers don't have the privilege of being inside the newsrooms, so faith and trust are really important because they don't have those glimpses. You have to stand your ground on everything or they don't trust you."

News publications enter into an unwritten contract with readers to deliver fair, accurate and relevant information. If readers perceive that a publication is breaching that contract they lose trust in its ability to

report credible information. Saint Johners have lost faith in *here*, and *here*, as a result, has lost readers.

*here's* lost readership is not quantifiable in terms of decreased circulation or lower pick-up rates. It exists in the intangible realm of public sentiment. But mention the words 'here' and 'Irving' in a room full of Saint Johners, and the invisible quickly becomes audible through outraged condemnations and vehement proclamations that "I never read [*here*] any more. It's not relevant to me."

"You can't own the mainstream and the alternative," says Leger, "It's not possible. The Irvings are going to have to define that paper for themselves now. It's on to a new phase of its life, and it's not reasonable to think it will go back to the way it was. It will have to win back readers in its own way, and I'm not sure how they're going to do that."

If the months since the sale are any indication, the new *here* is set to focus primarily on entertainment, moving away from community issues and more towards pop culture. This ties in well with Brunswick News' corporate imperative to ensure profitability, as it secures two separate demographics – one for its dailies, and one for *here*. "When we had *here* it was an independent entity," says Leger. "Now it's part of a family of media outlets. They're going to look at it as part of that family. They won't want one poaching off the other or pulling away part of its readership."

#### AN ORIGINAL VOICE IS GONE

The Senate Committee on Transport and Communications is currently holding hearings on the state of the media in Canada, with specific examination of media ownership issues. While community newspapers might seem inconsequential when compared to national dailies and 24-hour news broadcasts, as a direct line into the hearts and minds of local readers across Canada, they are on the front lines of democracy.

When Brunswick News bought the rights to publish *here*, they bought the responsibility to continue fostering Saint John's diversity of interests, events and perspectives. In failing to do this, they have cost Saint Johners an important voice, and weakened the spirit of Canadian democracy.

- 1 CBC Radio One, "Media Concentration and Voter Information," excerpt from *The House*, March 12 2005. Document located at Friends of Canadian Broadcasting: [http://www.friends.ca/News/Friends\\_News/archives/articles03260501.asp](http://www.friends.ca/News/Friends_News/archives/articles03260501.asp) (March 2005).
- 2 38th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION, EDITED HANSARD · NUMBER 025, November 16 2004, MP for Southwest New Brunswick Greg Thompson states: "In New Brunswick media concentration is a big issue. Irving Group, one of the strongest and largest corporations in the country, owns all the daily English language newspapers in New Brunswick. It owns several weekly newspapers and periodicals and in addition to that, numerous radio stations. It is media concentration at its worst." [http://www.parl.gc.ca/38/1/parlbus/chambus/house/debates/025\\_2004-11-16/hano25\\_2000-E.htm](http://www.parl.gc.ca/38/1/parlbus/chambus/house/debates/025_2004-11-16/hano25_2000-E.htm) (March 2005)
- 3 [www.giraffecycle.com](http://www.giraffecycle.com), October 29, web forum moderated by Matthew Wilson. On October 29 the Saint John based web forum [giraffecycle.com](http://www.giraffecycle.com) erupted with comments from upset locals and out-of-towners alike lamenting the sale of here to Brunswick News. The forum has since been reconstructed, but messages posted on October 29 are archived on the old forum: "Here News Just Got Bought Out by Brunswick News" [http://www.giraffecycle.com/oldforum/index.php?DATEIN=tpc\\_ywuwohhih\\_1099053545](http://www.giraffecycle.com/oldforum/index.php?DATEIN=tpc_ywuwohhih_1099053545). Comments concerning the sale are also available on the Moncton based forum [www.monctonlocals.com](http://www.monctonlocals.com) "Irving Empire Gobbles Up Here Magazine," <http://media.locals.ca/localsconf/viewtopic.php?t=14354&highlight=moncton+marquee> (November 2004).
- 4 "The Irving Empire looks to the next generation," *The Globe and Mail*, March 26 2005, p. B1, B4.
- 5 Forbes.com James, Arthur and John Irving <http://www.forbes.com/static/bill2005/LIRWZIM.html?passListId=10&passYear=2005&passListType=Person&uniqueId=WZIM&datatype=Person> (March 2005).
- 6 Mark Leger, interview with the author, Rothesay, New Brunswick, March 26 2005.
- 7 here expanded into Moncton on April 1, 2004. Brunswick News launched Metro Marquee on May 6, 2004.
- 8 Atlantic Community Newspapers Association newsletter of October 29, 2004 *here newspaper under new management* [http://www.acna.com/Members/various/november04/here\\_brunswick-news.html](http://www.acna.com/Members/various/november04/here_brunswick-news.html) (March 2005).
- 9 Mike Parker, here columnist and assistant editor, interview held in here's offices, Saint John, New Brunswick, March 26 2005.
- 10 Mark Leger, March 26 2005.
- 11 "Sum 41 determined to rock Moncton," here, December 9 2004.
- 12 [www.monctonlocals.com](http://www.monctonlocals.com), November 1 2004, post by former Metro Marquee sex columnist Heather Narduzzi: "I had a meeting with my editor at the Marquee on Thursday. I get in there, and he says, 'So I've got some bad news.' Then he brings out an email from the editor-in-chief of the T&T (Times and Transcript, Moncton's daily paper, owned by Brunswick News), and says, 'This is delivered by Al, but it comes straight from the top, meaning the Irving family themselves.' Then he reads me the email: 'Subject: Platonic Relationships. Please have Heather switch her column IMMEDIATELY to a relationships column. Not sex. No more sex. Think celibate!'" <http://media.locals.ca/localsconf/viewtopic.php?t=14493&highlight=narduzzi>