FEAR & LOATHING:

Confronting right-wing rhetoric in Canada’s news media

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How to read the news now that the Canadian media dream is over ...

Actual old-timey reporter ...
The Bad News
“Why bother with newspapers if this is all they have to offer?”

Hunter S. Thompson, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream, 1971 (Page 200)
The dirty little secret of the North American news business

- Hunter S. Thompson was right in ’71 ... it’s always been bad!
- The “news industry” always manufactured news, it didn’t just report it
- Attitudes and perceptions were always shaped by class and power
- Those attitudes and perceptions always shaped how news was reported
- Important stories were always ignored
- You just didn’t know what was happening ...
There was no ‘Golden Age’

- Well, there was a “Golden Age” for reporters
- The pay was OK ... because unions and print monopolies
- The job was fun
- But “balanced journalism” was always driven by economics
- The economics of mass-distribution newspapers, that is
- Corporate concentration, not digitization, ended that
In the news business, policy was learned through socialization

- What gets on the font page
- How stories are edited
- Reprimands and compliments
- Gossip ... always gossip
- Watching the bosses

  - Warren Breed’s Social Control in the Newsroom, 1955
So it used to be bad — now it’s worse. What went wrong?

- Bad business decisions
- Lousy journalism
- Bad government policy
- The rise of *narratives* over news
- The domination of the neoliberal narrative
- And, yes, the Internet
Bad business decisions drove lousy journalism

- Elimination of editors, bureaus
- Union busting, declining pay
- Constant hiring freezes, staff cuts
- End of the beat system, shorter and shorter stories
- The gerbil treadmill
- Forgotten history
- Free copy ... for the rich
- Same garbage, different media
“When editors say the Internet is destroying us, I think bad journalism is destroying them!”

“You need money to have serious journalism.”

“I hate journalists who talk about things they don’t know anything about.”

“Keep to truths and don’t bother with narratives.”

— Robert Fisk, The Independent, November 12, 2019
Government policy

- *It’s bad ... it could have been good!*
- **Davey Report, 1969** ... identified concentration of ownership as the key problem
- **Kent Royal Commission on Newspapers, 1970** ... ditto
- **Senate Report, 2006** ... ditto

*All ignored!*

Sen. Keith Davey above; Tom Kent below.
Recommendations of the Kent Royal Commission on Newspapers

- Limit ownership to 5 newspapers of 1 cross-provincial newspaper
- Break up monopolies
- Prevent cross-market radio-TV-newspaper monopolies
- Guarantee editorial independence
- Establish media ownership review organization

*All ignored!*
Royal Commission on Newspapers
Concentration of ownership gave us concentration of narratives

So we got *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, only neoliberal versions, instead of communist:

“There’s no news in the Truth, and no truth in the News!”
— Soviet proverb
Oh yeah, the Internet ...

- Yes, the Internet made things worse ...
- Digitization compounded dumb decisions
- Made it easy to give the news away
- Made it obvious everyone was publishing the same junk
- Made outrage a viable marketing strategy
- Made “fake news” a thing
- Enabled the race to the bottom
The Good News
Sorry, the bad news is there is no good news!

- Concentration of media ownership is not going away
- Concentration of permissible narratives is not going away
- Good journalism still costs money ... but revenue models don’t work any more
- Business models for progressive journalism are heavy on idealism, light on practicality
- Labour won’t help ... they just won’t help!
How to Read (and Write) the News
Education is part of the problem

“Lack of education. That’s the problem in Britain. Educational standards have fallen. That’s why we have Brexit!”

— Robert Fisk, November 12, 2019
Education

- A dumbed-down electorate consumes neoliberal claptrap more easily
- So part of the solution, as a matter of fact, is supporting teachers’ unions
- Resist the charter school shell game
- Resist equal treatment of religious education
How to *write* news

- Go places, talk to people
- Listen to what they’re saying
- Look them in the eye when they’re saying it
- Work the phones
- Be brave — don’t write the same crap the same day as everyone else
- Don’t fall for other people’s narratives ... *think before you write!*
How to *read* the news

- First, read *a lot* of news (this has never been easier)
- Read widely ... including sources you may *not* trust
- Read critically — look for similarities and differences
- Look for patterns
- Compare and contrast — *RT versus New York Times*
- Observe how different sides are treated differently
- Think all the time about narratives and how they impact storytelling
How to write the news by reading the news

- An admonition from Kris Wells, MacEwan University, via Twitter DM to me:

“Hi there. Saw you quote me in your Rabble article. Not activist, but academic should be the title. When media refer to me as an ‘activist’ it tends to devalue my academic credentials and expertise. It also allows the government to be more easily dismissive of critique.”
How to read news by reporters with no memory

- Try to counter loss of institutional memory in journalism
- Google has a neoliberal bias, even when it’s not trying to
- Google repeats errors ... endlessly
- Google is biased toward the immediate past
- Fahrenheit 451? ... You may actually have to use your memory!
- When they closed the Calgary Herald’s “morgue” ... I took all my files home
- Speak up when media gets history and facts wrong!
How to read news about conflict

Read critically to see how reality is framed to reinforce approved narratives

- Elected officials or union bosses?
- Settlers or occupiers?
- Compounds or neighbourhoods?
- Resistance or terrorism?
- Push back if you think reporting is wrong or misleading
Reading news about the economy

- What assumptions about the proper way to run an economy colour reporting of the economy?
- Why are debt and deficits always assumed to be bad? (Economists don’t think they are.)
- When and why are debt and deficit ignored?
- What are our learned assumptions about public services versus “private enterprise”? (What are the facts?)
- Why do we assume “taxes are theft”? How did this happen?
- What’s usually left out of economic reporting?
Pay attention to whom is speaking!

- Ask, *Where’s the progressive voice?*
- If there isn’t one, why not?
- Must there always be “balance”? On climate science? On gravity?
- Why do CBC panels on “Wexit” feature three Conservatives from Calgary?
- Ask, Why are you giving a platform to lunatics or racists in the name of balance?
Institutionalized journalism loves institutionalized propaganda

■ Question: Why are pronouncements of untrustworthy “institutes,” “federations,” “centres” and “associations” treated uncritically?

■ Answer: Institutionalized journalism is vulnerable to institutionalized propaganda

■ Interest groups, lobbyists and corporations are widely distrusted

■ Ergo, such entities set up supposedly neutral bodies to spread their gospel

■ Don’t be fooled!
Recognize untrustworthy sources

It’s not just lobby groups like the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, it’s who they bankroll ...

- Fraser Institute
- Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- Canadian Federation of Independent Business
- Frontier Centre
- University of Calgary?
Recognize the *signs* of an untrustworthy source

- Beware “grassroots” that are really Astro-Turf
- It’s not just *United We Roll*
- It’s the Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- There’s nothing respectable about the CTF!
- Is it an “institute”? A “centre,” a “federation,” an “association”? Beware!
- Ask yourself: Who is this group associated with? Who does it *sound* like this group is associated with?
- Ask this question about groups you know and groups you don’t know
- Trust your instincts
What about these groups? You tell me …

- Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- Manning Centre
- SecondStreet.org
- Canadian Constitution Foundation
- LabourWatch.com
- Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms
- Others? There are plenty …
Do you know these people?

- Preston Manning
- Stephen Harper ...
- Troy Lanigan
- John Carpay
- Colin Craig
- John Mortimer
- Karen Selick
Troy Lanigan

- President, Manning Centre
- Founder & CEO of SecondStreet.org
- Past president of Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- Past President of World Taxpayers Associations
- Director, Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms
- Member, Atlas Network “Council of Mentors”
John Carpay

- President, Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms
- Former Alberta “Director,” Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- Frequent contributor to Postmedia, etc.
- Close friend of Jason Kenney (ex CTF CEO)
- Lifelong “pro-life” activist, compares abortion to Holocaust
- Compared pride flag to swastika
- Former Reform Party and Wildrose candidate
Colin Craig

- President, SecondStreet.org
- Former Alberta “Director,” Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- Played role in drafting Harper’s “First Nations Financial Transparency Act”
- Former communications director, Manning Centre
- Frequent Postmedia contributor
John Mortimer

- President Canadian LabourWatch Association
- Former board member, Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- Former Canadian Alliance candidate
- Postmedia contributor
Karen Selick

- Litigation Director, Canadian Constitution Foundation
- Former Board member, Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- Frequent contributor, Postmedia, Globe and Mail, etc.

_Do you start to see a pattern here?_
Case study: Greta visits Edmonton

Greta Thunberg visits Edmonton and meets “United We Roll”
Safe assumptions about coverage ...

- Media loves conflict, even when there is none
- Media has a narrative — *all Albertans love oil*
- Media believes every story must be “balanced” — *except when they don’t*
Greta says she’s coming to Edmonton ...

- Media spends days reinforcing the potential for conflict
- Media spends days reinforcing the Alberta-loves-oil narrative
- Media provides balance by endlessly quoting “United We Roll”
- The message: Brace yourselves, Edmonton! A giant convoy of giant trucks is coming!
What actually happens?

- 4,000+ people march through downtown Edmonton in support of Greta
- Another 7,000+ are waiting at the Legislature to greet her
- Media seriously under reports crowd, bases reports on police estimate of *march*
- About 30 pickup trucks drive around the area for about half an hour, drivers get bored, and leave
- Maybe 60 people tops are involved in “counter-protest”
- No big rigs
- Media over reports size and numbers
- Media drops story
Takeaways

- Read a lot
- Read critically
- Be critical
- Push labour to fund honest, critical, progressive online media
- What might that look like? ... you tell me!
Questions?