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Canada's Weekly Newspapers

CANADA has 963 weekly newspapers, with a combined circulation of 2,475,140. Some distribute a few hundred copies every week, while others have circulation in the thousands. Singly or taken together, these weekly newspapers have a great influence on the thought and action of our people.

Everybody, in a sense, lives two lives, one in a small and the other in a great circle. He belongs by birth or choice to various intimate groups, like his family, his neighbourhood, and his cluster of friends. He is also a member of the whole society of Canada, and he is living within an interdependent system of nations. The weekly newspaper belongs to his intimacy.

It is not safe to generalize about newspapers, because of the wide difference in the thoroughness with which newspapers fulfil their function. We are not without journals that debase public taste and warp public opinion. It can be said, however, that the majority of Canadian weekly newspapers conscientiously maintain the highest standards.

Every newspaper is at one and the same time a business enterprise on which the owner and his family depend for their daily bread and an agency of mass communication bearing public responsibility. In this land, where the press has freedom under the law, the weekly newspapers discharge their public functions with credit to themselves and benefit to the country.

The average paper represented in the Canadian Weekly Newspapers Association, said William H. Cranston, publisher of the *Midland Free Press Herald*, in an article he wrote for *The Financial Post* last August, covers 82 per cent of the homes in its trading area, has a net paid circulation of under 1,500 copies a week, and is produced by a staff of fewer than ten. The staff usually includes the owner, who may be publisher, editor, printing foreman, advertising salesman and general caretaker combined.

There are few millionaires among the 535 publishers who are members of the C.W.N.A., but every weekly newspaper represents a respectable amount of capital for the size of its town. It is, usually, a family enterprise with strong bonds of community loyalty. Mr. Cranston pointed out that 95 per cent of editors of weekly, twice-weekly and tri-weekly newspapers had served one or more terms as president of the local Chamber of Commerce or Board of Trade; 45 per cent had been mayor or reeve, or had held other high elective office; 97 per cent were members of a service club, and 90 per cent had served as club president.

Community worth

In a world where the quiet, intimate, stable pattern of the small community has been so severely shaken, Canada is fortunate in the manner of her growth. Throughout our development, from isolated farms to clusters of houses in villages serving wide farming areas, and then on to towns and a few cities, we have managed to keep one foot on the soil.

For a time people flowed from rural communities to the cities. This response to industrial evolution built crowded urban centres that have exploded, during the past ten years particularly, into myriad suburban satellites, each with its own interests, prides and headaches.

Reconstitution of the small face-to-face community can be of significant assistance in restoring a vigorous sense of human dignity and worth. There is no other environment that can nourish the intimate values of life and the acts of sympathy and mutual aid and the warm appreciation of personality that together go to make up the spirit of democracy. It is the small community that gives root and reality to what Canada does in the world of nations.

The weekly newspaper has its home in such a community. Its readers are not anonymous creatures in

great impersonal aggregations, but the people in the next house, or the next street, known and understood.

The weekly newspaper knows that its great strength lies in getting itself read. To make itself widely readable the press must be free, and to be free it must be self-supporting financially.

Much has been written about "freedom of the press". Those who think of it without hysteria realize that this freedom is not an end in itself but a means to the end of a free society. Where men cannot freely convey their thoughts to one another, no other liberty is secure. A "kept" press has abdicated its function and its privilege of informing truthfully and advising honestly.

It can be said that on the whole the weekly press of Canada realizes its social responsibility, has maintained itself financially and economically so as to be able to withstand official or other interested pressure, and does its best to use its freedom actively in the interests of its community.

The weekly newspaper does not, as a rule, lose itself in political or other controversy, but rather seeks to bridge the gap between the citizen and his government by directing its public service enthusiasm at positive benefits to be sought. Improvement of health and living standards, preservation and utilization of natural resources, development of its neighbourhood according to the superior qualities it has: these are domains in which the weekly press makes its constructive contributions.

Revenue from advertising

So that it may publish its news and opinions free from the necessity to cater to some institutional or economic power, the weekly newspaper needs to sell advertising space. As a medium, a good weekly paper provides a unique way of reaching the public quickly, with thorough coverage of the market, and with undoubted value for the dollar cost.

Advertising rates in the weeklies are low. They are based, mainly, on steady use of good-sized space by local advertisers. You can buy an advertisement ten inches deep and two columns wide for an average of \$11 per insertion. Some of the larger papers published weekly, twice weekly and three times a week, associated as the "Class A Newspapers of Canada", have been cultivating the national advertising market, and 58 of them carried a total of 18 million lines of national display advertising last year. In the same period there appeared in their columns more than 200 million lines of local retail advertising. (In newspaper measurement there are about 14 "lines" to the inch, one column wide, so these totals represent more than 1,285,000 and 14,285,000 column-inches respectively.)

Use of the weekly newspapers for advertising has been growing steadily, not only among local merchants

but among concerns that advertise in all parts of the country. These national advertisers are realizing that the good coverage given local tradesmen would be equally good for them.

This is not to say that the weekly press is something new, but only that it is entering upon a new era, with advertisers and their agents showing new appreciation of its worth. The first newspaper published in Canada was the *Halifax Gazette* dated March 23, 1752, and the first paper printed entirely in French was *Le Canadien* of November 22, 1806. The years between those two dates and today have witnessed a satisfying growth in the number and quality of our newspapers.

What is news?

There is no unanimous agreement among newspapermen on a definition of news, and when academic people and philosophers add their opinions the confusion becomes compounded.

For any editor, what is news depends upon the time and the place and the people involved and the significance of what happens, all viewed through the eyes and from the environment of his readers. If something occurs at the other side of the world that vitally affects the lives of people in a 200-person Canadian village, that is news, and the weekly paper will try to extend its readers' knowledge by showing the relationship.

There is, however, a further factor to be considered, timeliness. The editor of a weekly that is published on Thursday knows that the events of last Friday were reported in the daily press, by radio and perhaps on television. They may even have appeared by now in the news reels. While not ignoring the unlikely fact that some of his readers do not see television, news reels, or daily newspapers and do not listen to the radio news, the editor will avoid loading his columns with old news, important though it may be.

An alert editor knows how to get around this difficulty, as can be seen in every issue of a good weekly newspaper. He cannot avoid mention of a declaration of war, the assassination of a president, the destruction of part of a city by flood. These are news, and nothing any newspaperman can do will alter the fact. The thing to do is to take the news and relate it to the people in the territory covered by the weekly newspaper. What effect will these events have upon local life, economically and socially? How are community institutions affected? What local families and individuals have been caught up in the event? Answers to these questions make the far-off happening of last Friday news here today.

Another thing known to the alert editor of a live weekly is that he cannot sit in his office waiting for news to come to him. A news story doesn't just happen. It depends upon organization of sources, on

looking ahead so as to anticipate coming events, on preparing questions that will bring out the covert implications, on planning the routine connected with publication so that fitting attention may be given some unexpected event near deadline.

He is a wise editor who recognizes and caters to the everyday interests of his readers in addition to satisfying their curiosity about unexpected happenings and "big" local events. For example, he will give space and deserved prominence to regulations designed to prevent loss of life, to articles he believes will contribute to the betterment of living conditions and the spread of happiness. He will not ignore so commonplace a thing as the weather, but he will try to make it interesting by informing his readers authoritatively about its current significance in their farming and business prospects: what has the state of the weather during the past week meant to the economy of the community?

Local news

In Canada, "news" is still largely local or regional in character. We inhabit half a continent, and we cannot possibly keep track of everything that is happening everywhere in it. Our interest in what is near and our preoccupation with what is familiar is not parochialism, but a necessity imposed upon us by conditions. The weekly newspaper, if the editor is a lively, inquisitive person, ministers ideally to our needs.

People in small communities, whether rural or suburban, have keen interest in whatever they see that is out of the ordinary. The commuter walking home from the train wants to know why the men are digging up the street; he is interested in when the new school will be opened, how long it will provide necessary accommodation and on what facts and speculation the council bases its judgment; he is curious about every change in his neighbourhood, whether it is big or little. There is, in fact, no incident so trifling that, in the hands of a competent weekly newspaper reporter, may not be developed into a news story — and frequently such stories make better reading than much of the "big" news crowding upon people through other media.

Newspaper textbooks have a lot to say about the value of "human interest" in reporting and editing. The big daily newspaper has to work harder to print human interest stories than does the weekly, for an obvious reason: the thousands who read the daily paper are not interested in Thomas Jones himself, but in the picturesque or tragic thing that has befallen Mr. Jones; the hundreds who read the rural or suburban weekly paper are interested in Mr. Jones himself, because they know him. What happened to Mr. Jones need not be urgent, but only something that affected him pleasurably or adversely, or something that might conceivably have happened to the reader.

Editors of weekly newspapers could, if their time permitted, add to the value of their papers by writing occasional expository articles dealing with issues of local importance. Such exercise would, too, be a relief for the editor because it would allow him to sink his teeth into something bigger than routine. An example might be the issue of whether or not to add chemicals to the water supply: the weekly editor who clarified such a subject, telling his readers what the points are upon which arguments are based, would be highly appreciated.

Given the bent for it, and skill in arranging his duties so as to allow time for it, the weekly editor will derive immense satisfaction from writing authoritatively on local issues: and, if he does his job competently, he need not fear competition from any source, even including the high-priced syndicate columnists with their wide-ranging polemics.

The editor

Intelligently developed, the prestige latent in editing and publishing a weekly newspaper in Canada provides satisfactions that are attractive to men of ability.

The independent owner of a weekly newspaper is well known and respected. He is the upholder of the values that count most in his community, the champion of every righteous cause, the proposer and supporter of changes that mark advancement over the old order of things, an anchor in time of storm and the troubler of the public conscience when it becomes too complacent. From him there issue ideas, solutions and enthusiasm.

The best editor will be out and around his community so as to be in touch with the interests of his readers. He will be like the artist in ancient Rome who concealed himself behind his paintings to listen to the criticism of passers-by. He will have a sensitized mind, picking up every impression that may serve his readers. People will consult him, because of his wide range of knowledge and unbiased interest. He will try to see both sides of controversial matters, and he will not suppress news that should be printed or views that represent a section of the public mind.

These virtues add up to make a man who makes a newspaper that is read and digested for its goodness. Mr. W. Telfer, Managing-Director of the Canadian Weekly Newspapers Association, said this in a letter to the *Monthly Letter*: "If someone asked me to list the virtues of the weekly press, I would give readership the prime position. Any paper if it is to be influential must not only have subscribers — it must have subscribers who read it thoroughly. My own opinions, and those of many readers and publishers with whom I have talked, make it appear that the weekly newspapers have perhaps a better claim to this criterion of worth than other newspapers."

Cultural force

Editors see the weekly newspaper as a pulsating, vital institution that reaches to the grass roots of the community social structure, reflecting its life, customs and culture. The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences was hesitant, in making its report in 1951, about giving this credit to the press.

Alluding to the newspaper press as a whole, the report said: "To what extent the newspaper press of Canada contributes effectively to the development of Canadian arts and letters is a matter of opinion. Although many of our leading newspapers over the years have devoted generous space to book reviews and to commentaries on music and the arts, and although we have in Canada many editors who write thoughtfully and with distinction, we should hesitate to assess these influences upon our cultural life."

Half of our Canadian people living at the time of the census a few years ago were born before 1924. They spent their formative years in a society relatively untouched by radio, to which television was unknown, and in which moving pictures were not the habit they now are. Certainly, in such a society, the local newspaper should share with the church, the school and the local library the credit for being the art, letters and science of the people.

Great movements in what the Royal Commission report calls "cultural life", such as the little theatre, had their modest beginnings as local drama groups sponsored and supported by the press. The press — and not least the weekly press — can justifiably claim credit for developing among readers support for orchestras, bands, and art groups, and for encouraging young people pursuing their muse by publishing their handiwork. It would be interesting to learn — and perhaps some future commission may find out — how many of Canada's nationally-known writers, artists, musicians and other cultural craftsmen received their first public support and encouragement in their local weekly newspapers.

Editorial page

Newspapers commonly reserve one page as the mouthpiece of the editor and his readers. It is a place where the news and trends of the day are discussed and analysed, and where debate clarifies issues.

The editor who takes his editorial function sincerely is in position to influence his community for good by speaking frankly, now softly and now with vigour, on matters that merit community thought and action.

The weekly editor knows that big words do not guarantee big thoughts, and he is given to clear, simple writing, perhaps punctuated with homely sentences

and expressions. His editorials reflect the needs and thoughts of ordinary people. They draw on a rich fund of sanity and candour. Mr. Cranston remarked in his article: "There is not a Member of Parliament at Ottawa or in any of the provincial capitals who does not watch closely what his local weekly editors are saying."

It is the editor's business to look out upon the world as pictured in the news columns and try to understand it. Where the news calls for action, he will suggest, with reasons based upon the evidence before him, the course he thinks it should take. He, following his detached and painstaking research, is in position to point out the vital and perhaps hidden significance of a proposed community project. He is, in the best tradition, appealing to truth and reason and intelligence; not to prejudice, passion and ignorance.

Such an editor makes his page the legitimate stage from which to express opinion, expose bias, and invite debate. He develops his "Voice of the People" column into a meaningful forum, open to everyone who has something worth saying. On such a page ideas strike sparks, and opposites rub each other into usable size and shape. The editor who can promote a lively readers' forum, printing several letters a week on topics of community interest, is contributing in an important way to the stability and betterment of the community.

Continued importance

Statistics are not very helpful in judging a phenomenon with so many aspects as the press has, but from the figures available it seems at least apparent that Canada has a vigorous weekly press, increasing in circulation and advertising. The other judgments, those of worth, are individual things, affected by many aspects of the publication: its community, its sort of reader and its editor's ideals, intelligence, expertness and energy.

It can be said with certainty that it is through the press that the people receive the information that enables them to change their ways of life for the better. When this information is given in the form of balanced presentation of basic facts, telling the fundamental purposes sought and outlining the alternatives, all spiced by skilful thought and observation, then the newspaper is living up to its high purpose.

Such a newspaper demands that its editor shall have ability, character, leadership and genuine skill in his craft. It is the sort of newspaper referred to by Lord Hewart, Lord Chief Justice of England, when he said: "Do we always think as gratefully, or indeed as justly, as we might, of the amazing ability, diligence, care and learning; the wit, the humour, the skill and the versatility; the dutifulness, the courage, the conscientiousness, and the sheer hard work which go to the making of the best kind of newspaper?"