

Media As Bland Milk Chocolate 'Chock Full' of Nuts

by Bruce Rogers

Seldom reliable sources have charged that the Canadian Media are full of left-leaning do-gooders, bleeding heart liberals and sensationalist scandal mongers. Not true. In fact our media efforts are more like the bland, milk chocolate which surrounds the roasted filberts in a candy bar. It is our lot to convince the unwary consumer that a handful of nuts is worth twenty cents. I sometimes wonder if our well-intentioned efforts are worth a damn.

My concern is that the influence of profit worshippers is largely unimpeded by the pin pricks of the media. Our alerts and exposes get little space in the news columns competing with entertainment features. The bulk of newspaper space and radio-TV time is given over to pap and commercialism. Industry, commerce, government and media all do their respective things with the gullible, vulnerable consumer as target. Examine your newspaper or other media and you will find many so-called news stories based on PR flack and government handouts.

Journalists have been taking heart recently because of a resurgence of investigative reporting. Even some politicians under attack seem to recognize "muckraking" as a valid media function. Ontario's Premier Davis, scolding the Globe and Mail recently for revealing the intemperate and indiscrete letters of Ross Shouldice, a Northern Ontario Tory bagman, said "muckraking" was all right but "mudslinging" was not. "Muckraking" is a term once applied to people like Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbel by President Teddy Roosevelt in 1906. It came to mean though, investigative reporting resulting in exposure of wrongdoing. Americans didn't like the message but were glad of reforms that resulted from muckraking like the clean up of the Chicago meat packing industry because of Upton Sinclair's book The Jungle.

These days, because the Globe and Mail has been doing

its job well at Queen's Park, because the Washington Post backed two reporters in their investigation of the Watergate Scandal, because of a couple of Quebec papers are front-paging scandals, journalists are feeling they may be involved in a worthwhile service after all.

Journalism as a 'Fourth Estate' is a British concept used in the United States. It seems to be getting more respect in Canada these days. More journalists are assuming they have a right to access and an obligation to report. Even politicians seem to be grudgingly recognizing the public's right to know. Of course the public needs to know for effective democracy and because of the individual's psychic need-to-know.

There's no shortage of targets. There's no dearth of civil rights to defend, no lack of injustice to divulge. There's no shortage of political and bureaucratic actions to expose when governments spend the taxpayer's dollar on the Bricklin car in New Brunswick and on the Syncrude gift to the oil companies, whose tar sand profits will flow to the U.S., there's a job for the modern town crier.

THEPE'S DRUG ABUSE
- BY THE DRUG COMPANIES ON PRICES

There's lead in our air, asbestos, arsenic and mercury in our water. Canadians pay exorbitant prices for drugs. We're subjected to an inundation of deceptive advertising. Productive farm land is destroyed before our very eyes and industrial polluters get away with destruction of our environment.

But even if journalists are conscientious as hell about exposing threats to our health and economic interests, the revelations reach the public in a commercial context that supports the status quo. The Toronto Star may get your attention with its front page headline and a big human interest photo but its most effective communication is the full page ad for Faton's or The Bay. Page after page is devoted to display ads.

In TV, half hour news and public affairs programs struggle with budgets as small as \$800 while commercials before, after and during such shows have enjoyed lavish budgets with highly skilled teams concentrating their talents for maximum impact.

We can spend a half hour warning that Freon gas threatens the globe's entire ecosystem and that we have maybe sixteen years before the impact is widely felt and the damage irreparable. But during the half hour we probably see at least two commercials selling products like hairspray or oven cleaner in aerosol cans using Freon. Our editorial efforts have simply provided the

framework for the messages with the greatest impact. The credibility we strive for lends authority to the commercials.

In radio, except for feature newscasts, there is usually little more than five minutes of news in an hour. Some of that is given to light-weight, human interest features and the inevitable closing brightener or kicker. The private stations even sell commercial time in and around the newscasts. The rest of the air time is devoted to pop music and commercials. Even CBC programs like Harry Brown's "Metro Morning" and "As It Happens" with Barbara Frum do more to build credibility for commercialism than they do for reform. And they're really trying.

We accept consumerism and greed. Listeners, viewers and readers are defined as consumers and that's the root of our complicity with economic system. The system lacks conscience unless the do-gooders manage an information breakthrough. Then, for the sake of good public relations and future sales, modest reform may follow on the broad front, the war is not being won. The battle has hardly been joined.

SERVING THE SYSTEM WE RAIL AGAINST

It is a big job. Journalists must be constantly aware that they are part of a system and that their dedicated daily labours do as much to perpetuate the social ills they rail against as they do to expose those ills and their perpetrators. We must be ready to say daily that the Emperor is promenading au naturel. We must hit harder and more often. We must recognize that fairness has nothing to do with being patient with the public relations nonsense from lead polluters or asbestos purveyors. We must be on guard against serving the system that uses us.

Acceptance of the status quo is probably the most evil philosophy operative in our society. And there are too many acceptors in the media. But it is not our job to "get along". Discomfort and dissatisfaction should be the lot of media people. We should be suspicious, impatient, quick-to-anger and meticulous in our efforts to alert and inform the public. In shaping the message we should take example from the sensationalist yellow press, populist pop TV and the polished, psyche-directed skills of the ad agencies.

Our job is to make sure the anti-freon warnings are heard and heeded. Our job is to help drive aerosol can off the shelves. Our job is to make industry abide by the toothless anti-pollution legislation and, more, to force industry to give the public good as much concern as the company's profit picture.

Our job is to make politicians and government bureaucrats speak openly and honestly. The deliberations, actions or inaction of all public bodies must be open to constant citizen examination.

It is discouraging that the media are not winning. But it is no wonder, when so many in the media don't recognize that they are involved in a war with the odds against them. Too many think they have to work at being entertaining and blandly pleasant. But news and information are inherently entertaining because it serves our need to know. It enables the individual to make choices and decisions instead of just being vulnerable to the momentum of the powerful.

Getting commercials off radio and television would help. If CBC stopped serving advertisers it probably would not change editorial efforts much but it would lower the odds against editorial impact in the larger, multi-media arena.

Tough, hard-nosed journalists must strive for an investigative initiative and for maximum impact, exposure and audience reaction. Our major institutions and the guardians of calm and respectability are naturally opposed to what we need - advocacy journalism. There is little hope for such a breakthrough because the media are part of our institutional establishment. Media workers must serve the established interests and not rock the boat. So the media will continue to be chock full of nuts but not very nourishing. In other words, we will continue to be the blind leading the blind.

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About 1,000 people will crowd ~~Faton~~ Auditorium tonight for a dressed up version of the old church hall lantern slide show.

Estelle Craig's World Adventure Tours have been running for 28 years, and are Toronto's second-longest-running entertainment attraction after the Toronto Symphony.

Incredibly, at a time when overseas travel is commonplace and color TV brings the world into your living room, more people than ever before are willing to venture out on a cold night and pay up to \$3.50 to see a Craig travelogue.

Down the years escapism was a major reason for the popularity of the film shows about other countries—and the show tonight and Friday with Arthur

UP FRONT

A favored advertiser, Faton's, gets a Page One plug in the Star. Yet the litany goes on that the advertiser never influences the news. Who else could get a boxed Page 1 centre position story that says "About 1,000 people" WILL attend an event, and even includes the price?

"UP FRONT" with the top news of the day - a travelogue at Faton Auditorium no less!