

John Turner and The Star

- The Not So Apparent Heir

By Monty Dargan

The daily newspaper does a great deal more than merely report the news. Items judged to be of special importance are, of course, given front page coverage with appropriate headlines to catch the reader's attention. Elsewhere in the paper events of a regular and recurring nature are reported on with appropriate 'colour' writing - sports, entertainment, real estate, social activities etc. Commercial content, advertising is of course extremely heavy in the modern metropolitan daily and competes vigorously for space with 'reportage and regular features. This has led many critics to point their fingers disapprovingly at what is known as the fragmentation of the news. (1)

The Toronto Star, the largest circulation daily in Toronto, has devised a format to take care of the problem of what goes where in the paper. Each edition is broken up into separately folded sections. The first section being devoted to lead items, national, provincial and world news, the second to Metro news, editorials, letters and 'Insight', the third to Sports and Financial, the fourth to Family and Entertainment and so on - the weekend edition often splits the last two named as well as adds other sections on Real Estate, Modern Living and Travel. So voluminous is the Star's weekend edition it would take a few hours to read through everything in it. This paper will, however, focus upon the relationship between the first section, page one in particular, and the second section, 'Insight'

page, editorials and letters in particular. In this respect, some aspects of the newspaper as a communication medium vis-a-vis its more obvious function as an information delivery system may be better understood. The exercise and direction of bias and its consequences will also be explored. It is proposed to accomplish this here by investigating the circumstances surrounding a front page story, the events preceding it and consequent upon it. These 'events' being references in the sections being focused upon which are relevant to the front page story. While the front page story selected concerns a personality, the social and political associations of this personality are of crucial importance as will be made clear. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to establish a particular theoretical approach.

In their 'Theories of Mass Communication' DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach refer to the kind of communication process termed the 'two-step flow of communications'. Information moves from the media to relatively well-informed people with good exposure to mass communications. These individuals act as opinion leaders in influencing those to whom they pass on the information they receive or their interpretation of it. These opinion leaders are generally effective in one area of expertise and leadership often occurs horizontally i.e. between persons of somewhat similar status. (2) The question might then be asked what medium is most important in delivering information to these opinion leaders? For an answer recourse is made to a source quoted by J. Michael Jordan in an article in 'Media Probe'. (3) He quotes two researches, Patterson and McClure, as concluding that in relation to election coverage TV network news had little or no influence on how voters learned about the candidates stand on issues but newspapers were far more effective in making voters better informed on issues. Jordan adds that the interesting aspect of their research was that newspapers are capable of increasing awareness.

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In a daily newspaper straightforward reporting directs attention to an event considered 'newsworthy' by the gatekeeping apparatus of the paper. The particular event by itself does not necessarily constitute an issue and because of the tendency to fragmentation referred to earlier is not always capable of being easily fleshed out. In the context of the Toronto Star, the second section with its 'Insight', Editorial-Opinion and Letters pages performs this function of fleshing out the news story, integrating or associating it with a complex of concerns which will either tend to emphasize its importance or downgrade it. Where its importance is established an 'issue' is created. The trouble with this approach is that it seems to leave out the effects of all other mass communication media and interpersonal communication going on in the society and to give the impression that the newspapers are the only media in which an issue can come about. It is not the intention to imply this but merely to indicate the ongoing mechanics of issue-creation as it occurs in a daily - an 'issue' itself being something of a persistent nature tending to stretch over a period of time.

On November 19, 1976, the Toronto Star carried a front page story with the headline "Turner Hammers PM For Not Doing Enough To Rescue Quebec". This headline, the main one on the page, was accompanied by a picture of John Turner appearing both aggressive and authoritative, and captioned "win their hearts, minds". The story itself reported that Turner in an "off the record" speech to about 500 members of the exclusive Primrose Club criticized Trudeau over the handling of Quebec and the Federal government on its economic policies. The report also described Turner as a "man often said to be Trudeau's likeliest successor". Turner reportedly called for an end to wage and price controls, criticized the A.I.B. as having a dislocatory effect on the economy, Quebec in particular, and said that Canada was now at the bottom of the line as a credit risk.

Within the same issue on page three of the same section a story slugged (UPI-CP-Special) was headlined "Liberals Urged To Decide Now If Trudeau Stays" which dealt with a letter allegedly written before the November 15th Quebec election by a Liberal backbencher and directed to party members. The report on Turner's speech was continued prominently on page 6 which was otherwise given over entirely to reports on the Quebec political scene following the Parti Quebecois victory.

Moving to the second section of the issue of Nov. 19th, the 'Insight' page dealt with "After Controls What Then?", the editorials said that schools should teach French, free sale of guns cost lives and commented on the Reed Paper forest project. One opinion column notes that the PQ win could herald a change for the better in Canada, while the other claimed that a "Do Nothing" Federal government paved the way for the Parti Quebecois victory. Interesting for its lack of supporting coverage was the Letters page. The letter concerned Attorney General McMurtry's proposed change to the law affecting unmarried couples in Ontario, Ontario's unemployed, the fire service, OHIP and Blue Cross, alcoholism, Peruvian Art and Soviet Jews.

On the following day, the 20th, the Turner story received some follow up in a minor headline at the bottom of page 1 - "Big Mac Hits Back At Critic Turner 'Grandstand' Speech". Donald Macdonald, the present Finance Minister, was reported as having spoken to the Star by phone and addressed himself to the Star report of the previous day. This story also reported that Macdonald had said on TV in reference to the possibility of Mr. Turner seeking the Prime Minister's job that "Most thoughtful Canadians would agree that at a time when there is a very substantial challenge to Confederation...to start off on any kind of internal fight at the convinced federalists would be a serious mistake. The rest of the story indicated that Liberal MPs were negative to the report on Turner and one member said

reference to the Liberal backbencher reported the previous day as urging a decision on Trudeau's future, that he "has no support".

The bulk of this story was continued on page 18 of the first section where a boxed column was headlined: "Turner Seeks Privacy After Speech". Turner has no further comment; the report quoted his secretary as saying, he doesn't feel people are interested in him. The members of the Primrose Club, including veteran Liberal Senator David Croll, were, however, enthusiastic the report concluded.

Some fleshing out occurred in the second section of the same day. One of the editorials declared "Turner Throws His Hat Into The Ring" just to make things perfectly clear, and an artist's drawing of John Turner was inset. The Letters section continued the debate centred around Quebec, separatism and bilingualism and Trudeau, a group of topics which, except on very few occasions, was always represented in the section, as far back as the beginning of October. The editorial on Turner suggested he already had his 'Quebec lieutenant' picked out, in the shape of Jean Chretien. It feared that Turner's past association with Trudeau's policies and his resignation without explanation were harmful to his image, although this last apparently resulted over a personality clash with the Prime Minister. It ended by suggesting Turner needs to "extend his search for ideas" beyond the executive suite of Canada's biggest corporations.

If Turner was becoming the focal point of an issue in the context of problems in Confederation, the economy and the Federal political scene, it could confidently be expected that, at the very least, within a few days the public would be hurrying to contribute its piece via the Letters page, not taking into account the possibility of some more visible and 'newsworthy' support emerging and appearing in the first section,

maybe even front page. (This might easily occur also in another medium and lend itself to re-reporting in the Star). Alas, this was not to be.

The 21st, being Sunday, the Star did not publish. On the 22nd, page 1, 'Opinion' and 'Insight' continued with the Quebec question. On the 23rd the Auditor General's report captured page 1, 'Insight' and the editorials (although the economy received attention one) while the Quebec debate continued in 'Letters'. On the 24th Trudeau and Quebec were on page 1 and in the editorials and separatism appeared again in 'Letters'. The same pattern repeated itself on the 25th and 26th with, in addition, 'Opinion' featuring Confederation on the former date and 'Insight' on the latter. Finally Turner reappeared on the 27th.

On the front page of this issue the Star carried what it described as the first of five editorials on Quebec, discussing the problems associated with that province and offering solutions. It said among other things that the changes needed to provide solutions amounted to what would be "a massive reversal of pol - if the Prime Minister can accept it then with help (emphasis mine) he would be the best leader to carry on". On the 'Letters' page the following headline appeared: "No attack on Trudeau in speech: Turner". In his letter Turner took "strenuous" issue with the front page story of Nov. 19th. He was not disturbed by the fact that his speech was reported on, he said but objected to the misleading headline and the statement that he blamed Ottawa's policies for the PQ victory. He had laid the blame, in fact, at the feet of the provincial Liberals in Quebec. He regretted choosing such a moment for giving his analysis of the situation when the Prime Minister needed all the support he could command.

Before any evaluation of this series of developme

can be attempted some background needs to be filled in as regards Mr. Turner's page one coverage on November 19th. If Mr. Turner was a potential issue it is not unreasonable to expect that his name would have been appearing quite regularly in the sections under focus. Certainly the contextual matter with which his Nov. 19th appearance was surrounded was extremely prevalent in the period prior to his front page story. Bearing in mind that Mr. Turner is not a provincial political figure, nor is the Star an Ottawa paper, there was not a single day, going back as far as October 1st, when the issues of Trudeau-Quebec, Trudeau-economy did not appear in one or more of the sections under focus. It is well to keep in mind also that much attention was directed during this period to Labour's Day of Protest, an issue so pointed and telescoped by the press as to have removed itself from under the Trudeau-economy umbrella in this writer's assessment, and therefore not counted as such within this analysis. Of note also is the fact that the 'Opinion' section was as often as not directed to foreign affairs and that considerable media space was devoted to the quality of high school education in the province.

Mr. Turner was mentioned once in an 'Opinion' piece on October 1st by Anthony Westell concerning inflation, controls and unemployment. His name could easily have been overlooked had not his picture appeared boldly in the middle of the article. On October 16th he reappeared, but this time there was no mention of his name. His face appeared in a cartoon on the editorial page, represented as the Sun radiating a powerful heat upon a plunging Icarus-type figure which strongly resembled Mr. Trudeau; the figure's wings bore the inscription 'Liberal Party' and were falling away from him precipitating his ungainly descent. On the 26th of October Mr. Turner received coverage on page 1. A minor heading at the foot of the page proclaimed that "1500 hear Turner defend bilingualism but criticize government at

Canadian Club". The bulk of this report was carried page two along with a huge picture of Mr. Turner. So enough, a few days later, Mr. Turner's photograph re-appeared on the 'Letters' page (Nov. 3rd), hand over mouth, looking slightly embattled, next to a letter which was captioned: "Sorry Day If Turner Became PM He Claims". The letter writer referred to Turner's defense of bilingualism at the Canadian Club and thought him brainwashed by Trudeau. He compared him unfavourably with Richardson, the former Defence Minister, who had been against Trudeau's bilingualist policy. This was the only letter on Turner. On Nov. 12th in an 'Opinion' article suggesting that the Prime Minister's resignation would be the best response to a separatist win, Mr. Turner's name was mentioned the probably next Prime Minister. On Nov. 16th this same columnist, Anthony Westell, in another 'Opinion' piece entitled "PQ Victory Deals Another Blow To The PM's Credibility", said that if Trudeau could be persuaded to retire the time might soon be perfect for re-appearance of John Turner as the 'national saviour'. The 19th November brought the front page piece.

A little research undertaken as a result of interest piqued by the curious Turner affair has provided some interesting facts and a few more or less tentative conclusions. While allowing that there is room for more rigorous hypothesizing and methodology, it is no altogether inappropriate that these conclusions be stated at this time.

An examination of readers' input via the 'Letters' page indicated some interesting things. There were 24 editions of the paper in October, and in 24 of these 'Letter' page carried content related to Trudeau-Quebec. Usually this was focussed on the bilingualism policy of the Federal government. This type of content had probably been highly stimulated by the controversy over the use of French in Quebec airspace which had occurred during the previous month but by October had become

generalized and expressed itself in mainly polarized views on bilingualism, either for or against, with little middle ground. During the month of November (up to the 19th) this pattern continued but with slightly less impressive frequency. Interestingly, it was absent on the 15th, the day of the Quebec election, and on the 19th, the day of the Turner front page. It is regrettable that the Star does not indicate the date of the published letters. One gets the distinct feeling that, as far as these go, a tap is being turned off and on according to the editors' wishes. While a front page headline in the October 5th edition read "Mini-Survey In Metro - Let's Go Bilingual And Keep Quebec", their 'Letters' page indicated that the battle was in full swing. Also, front page stories often drew a considerable response in the 'Letters' page (e.g. Metro Zoo problems, penitentiary problems, gun controls etc.) and 'Insight', 'Opinion' and editorial pieces evoked fresh responses, but there was no evidence to suggest a flow in the opposite direction originating from material in the 'Letters' page. The Turner case indicated a flow from section two back to section one, front page, on two occasions, but it had its 'point of origin' in staff contributed pages and elicited one negative letter in response in the first instance and no response at all (except for Turner's) in the second. Given the fact that the Star has power over what appears in the 'Letters' page (i.e. power of selecting contributions sent in) and considering Mr. Turner's statement that people are not interested in him, evaluating the real relationship between the Star and Turner is problematical. What is evident is the clearly contrived nature of the front page story and the role of the second section pages in keeping the readers aware of issues and personalities even when they are off centre stage.

The idea of Turner as Pretender to the throne of Trudeau has clearly died a natural death. The question is, did it ever have a natural life? Can a palace

revolution be attempted via the front page of a daily newspaper? The Star emerges badly tarnished on two counts. Mr. Turner is quite legitimately a major political figure who is for the moment outside of the mainstream of political life and wishes to maintain some degree of public exposure until more opportune times present themselves. The Star has damaged his credibility and his options by exposing his isolation from the Trudeau camp and more importantly from the core of Liberal parliamentary support. Mr. Turner, to this point, has not ventured into the 'hustings' to drum up public support for himself. This indicates that his understanding of the requirements of Federal political leadership is at some variance from that of the Star's. The Star's analysis of these requirements has been off base in the past. If the paper had seriously believed in the possibility of a palace revolution, its formulators of policy can only be termed megalomaniac - megalomania being a disease which attacks powerful men who are frustrated by the limits to their power.

This introduces a more serious indictment against the paper. The object of the Star's hatred is Pierre Trudeau and the paper will go to any lengths to provoke a crisis in his administration and public antipathy to his leadership short of losing circulation. In attempting to promote John Turner as a rallying point for the cause, the Star was sticking thorns into Mr. Trudeau's flank, but, more importantly, despite their liberal and confederationist rhetoric, they were encouraging and promoting a brand of English Canadian chauvinism which prevents a realistic understanding of the French Canadian fact. Such phrases as "going bilingual and keeping Quebec" and "winning their hearts, minds" obscure what is essentially a political problem by submerging it in a conceptual framework which is essentially paternalistic at best. Others have more powerful descriptions.

What has emerged from this investigation is the failure of the Star, in the short run at least, to create a popular leader. What is the longer term result of this exposure on Mr. Turner's political future is more difficult to evaluate, although an opinion has been advanced. It emerges also that public input into the paper is minimal and then manipulated. What influence the paper had in altering public attitudes away from Trudeau towards Turner during that period lacks a mechanism for measurement and must remain unknown. But the mechanism relating to 'issue' formation within the paper has been indicated with some substantive evidence. Still, a more satisfactory explanation of some of the processes and problems dealt with here deserves to be presented. This paper, hopefully, helps to cast some light in this area and suggest fruitful avenues of investigation.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Mind Managers, Beacon Press, Boston, 1973, Herbert I. Schiller p.24
2. Theories of Mass Communication, David McKay Co. Inc New York, 1975, p.212. - Melvin L. DeFleur, Sandra Ball-Rokeach
3. Media Probe, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall '76, The Star, The Globe, and the 1975 Ontario Election by J. Michael Jordan, pp.17-18.