



# A Probe on Public Opinion on Press Restrictions

DOUGLAS M. HOWARD, C. EDWARD WILSON *University of Western Ontario*

## Abstract

A survey of 203 residents of Windsor, Ontario showed that in general public feelings favoring restrictions on the news media were associated with specific news stories and the way they were handled. Matters of taste were mentioned much more frequently than substantive issues as reasons for desiring control. Respondents generally chose "soft" rather than "harsh" methods of controlling the press, with government control selected by a small minority.

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It seems a reasonable inference from past studies that the idea "freedom of the press", however, expressed, does not evoke responses based on deep-seated principles among citizens of Canada or the United States. The Canada-wide survey conducted for the Special Senate Commission on the Mass Media (Davey Committee)<sup>1</sup> found that different meanings attached to the concept and its variants depending on the medium being considered, as did Shaw in his study of American university students.<sup>2</sup> The latter study also pointed out differences among groups with different professional orientations. Stevens found that a sample of students held different opinions about what the government ought to require television and newspapers to carry in controversial situations.<sup>3</sup> Becker et. al. reported that public support for press freedom varied according to political situation.<sup>4</sup>

Further, polls surveyed by Erskine, covering the period from 1936 to 1970, included such findings as that differential agreement on freedom of the press to attack various targets depended on the target, and that a vast majority opposed government power to tell the media what to publish or refrain from publishing, but a clear majority also opposed the right of the media to publish information the government considered contrary to national interest.<sup>5</sup> In sum, freedom of the press has not been seen as a topic-free or situation-free concept.

Previous research appears largely to have been based on a

dichotomous concept of press freedom, with complete freedom and government control as the alternatives, although government control is often implied rather than specified. Shaw's 1972 study is an exception, and included government censorship, government licensing, punitive fines and imprisonment, a non-governmental agency and self-regulation by a group of peers as alternatives. These ideas were adapted for a part of the present study. Grotta found government controls emerged in a different cluster from other types of controls, but did not specify what these others might be.<sup>6</sup> He also reported that a majority of his subjects agreed both that no one should be able to tell newspapers what to print, and that newspapers should be made to publish corrections in cases of error.

While the Davey Committee presented information that can be interpreted as supporting the idea that the public judges the desirable degree of freedom according to the situation, the interpretation was not made.<sup>7</sup> Becker et. al. did make such an interpretation, but in general the literature seldom considers freedom of the press as a reduceable area.<sup>8</sup>

The present study was designed to probe beyond the typical question designed to elicit a yes-or-no answer to non-specific questions dealing with press freedom. An attempt was also made to help respondents keep firmly in mind the *news* function of the media, rather than allowing newspapers, television and radio to be compared or contrasted on total content, a situation which may have helped account for the findings cited in the first paragraph above.

Windsor, Ontario, an industrial center of 247,500 population on the St. Clair River across from Detroit, Mich. was selected for the study. Residents have available the *Windsor Star*, with an average daily circulation approaching 89,000, the Detroit papers, and a variety of Canadian and American radio and television stations. Eight grid squares from a municipal map were selected as representing various economic sections of the city. Within each grid section, 10 streets were randomly selected, and 45 addresses on the 10 streets similarly chosen, giving a total of 360 addresses. Two hundred and three (56.4 per cent) responses were obtained. Interviewers were journalism students from St. Clair College of Applied Arts and Technology in Windsor, directed by their instructor, Patrick Hickey and the senior author. The survey was taken in the spring of 1978. Chi square was used for testing of results, with the  $p=0.05$  level selected for significance. Obtained values of  $p$  are reported.

Comparison with data from the *Financial Post Survey of Markets 1980* showed that the respondents underrepresented the lowest educational grouping (elementary school completion), and overrepresented the 21-34 age group. Test for age and education group differences in survey replies, however, showed no significant

differences, so the variation in the sample from population was considered non-critical.

It should also be noted that the *Windsor Star* is a member of a local press council and the Ontario press council. However, Atwood and Starck<sup>9</sup> reported that the existence of a press council containing both community and media representatives did not change public perception of the press.

As is not uncommon in such studies, a small proportion of subjects, 71 of 203 (35 per cent) felt the news media should have "complete freedom to publish or broadcast anything the operator and his staff feel is news." One hundred respondents (49.3 per cent) felt the media should have "limited freedom in which certain kinds of (news) stories may not be published or broadcast." A further 25 (12.3 per cent) felt the media should have no freedom and should have to "adhere to guidelines and regulations set down by an external agency." Cross-tabulation by age, sex, income and education showed no significant variation in the pattern. Answers to questions eliciting preferred medium for news and time spent with that medium showed a tendency for increasing time spent to relate to greater degree of freedom preferred, but the tendency was significant ( $p = 0.005$ ) only in the case of those preferring radio.

The majority choice of restrictions on the media should not be interpreted as a manifestation of desire for some sort of rigorously applied story-by-story control. Attempts to produce more specific information were based on two "streaming" questions designed to eliminate respondents with no specific complaints against the news media and follow up the feelings of those who had complaints. The two questions and their ancillaries will be dealt with separately. The first asked "...was there (in the past year) a news report that you felt should not have been in the newspaper or on radio or television?" Fifty-one respondents (25 per cent) replied affirmatively. A significant relationship ( $p = 0.0001$ ) existed between the "yes" answer to this question and the degree of freedom most desired, with 88.2 per cent (44) choosing the limited or no freedom options, compared to 55.1 per cent of the rest of the sample.

Those replying "yes" were asked to choose from six methods—including one open-ended—for control of the media, and 49 of 51 responded. Forty-three per cent (21) favored supervision by a non-government agency, with 24.5 per cent (12) favoring self-regulation by the news media. Five respondents (10.2 per cent) favored each of government censorship or government licencing of news media outlets. Six respondents (12.2 per cent) thought punitive fines or imprisonment a satisfactory remedy for press transgressions. One respondent chose the open-ended alternative but did not specify his preferred method of control. Respondents were asked to explain their choice of agency, and 40 did. Those who selected supervision by a non-

governmental agency typically commented that government involvement would be partisan and was already too extensive in life, and that layment could represent the public best while avoiding the self-interest implicit in media self-regulation. Those who selected media self-regulation typically commented that the method was fairest, and would keep the government at bay. Those selecting government censorship or licencing commented generally that the government was the only agency with sufficient power to stop abuses, and that the government was the best representative of the public's interest.

The same 51 respondents were offered four alternative means (one open-ended) of controlling individual news reports. Twenty-nine (59.2 per cent) favored "a check on all news before release," 17 (34.7 per cent) opted for action only after a specific complaint arose following publication. One respondent selected a check on all news after publication and two chose the open-ended without specifying. Two did not reply.

The group of respondents was also asked which specific stories they felt ought to have been left out, and most replied on a basis that can be interpreted as an offended sense of good taste, rather than a matter of substantive principle. Reports given the social activities of the estranged wife of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau were specified as the stories which ought to be left out by 14, with eight complaining about "gory" coverage given the Jonestown, Guyana, massacre-suicide. Other responses interpreted as dealing with matters of taste ranged from a complaint about a television feature on toys at Christmas to reporters intruding into private grief. Eleven responses dealt with more substantive issues. Five complained of details of criminal activities which might permit emulation, and other matters raised were stories on religious matters, abortion, feminism and union activities. Two respondents could not recall the specific story to which they had objected. Slightly fewer than half the same subjects felt there were other kinds of stories which ought to be left out, but when asked to specify, most simply restated their specific previous objection in general terms. For instance, those who had objected to coverage of Mrs. Trudeau said celebrities' private lives, or social news of political figures, was another kind of news that ought not to run. Other typical answers included gory details of crimes and disasters, with mention usually made of television. Half the respondents either replied there were no other types of stories which they felt ought to be left out, or did not reply to the question.

The 51 respondents who said they had noticed a news story during the previous year that they felt should have been omitted were asked which medium they felt was most in need of censorship of general news coverage. Forty-eight responded, and including multiple answers,

television was named 30 times, newspapers 12, newsmagazines eight, "others" five times and radio three times.

The second "streaming" question asked all respondents if, in regard to events over the past year of which they had knowledge, "have you felt the news media failed to give adequate coverage of any of the events?" Twenty-seven (13 per cent) of the 203 respondents said "yes". Twenty-six of the 27 responded to a further question: "which particular medium do you feel most often fails to give coverage of events?" Fifteen (57.6 per cent) singled out radio as the worst offender, with four giving multiple responses, three each selecting newspapers and television, and one choosing newsmagazines. A significant relationship ( $p = 0.026$ ) existed between specific medium of choice as a news source and a feeling of inadequate coverage, with 31.4 per cent (11) who chose television saying "yes", compared to 18 per cent (11) who chose newspapers, 10.3 per cent (3) who made multiple media choices and one respondent (3.8 per cent) who selected radio as his major news medium. In sum, most respondents did not feel media coverage was inadequate, but those who preferred television did feel that way more often than those who chose other media for preferences—and radio was judged the least adequate in news coverage.

A further question attempted to elicit the type of stories the 27 respondents felt were inadequately covered. The majority (18, or two-thirds) mentioned specific incidents such as the Three Mile Island nuclear plant accident or local affairs. Two wanted more detail on the Jonestown story, and one on the Prime Minister's private life. One also wanted more information on child-rape. The non-specific answers tended to call for more "happy" news and human interest features. Several could think of no specific story or topic area, but generally felt something was lacking: "I have felt this way quite often," one replied. Only five of the 27 respondents replied to a question asking if there were other areas they felt lacked adequate coverage. The replies all arose from specific areas of personal interest, such as college sports to "what's going on in Lebanon."

The 27 respondents who felt there had been inadequate coverage were given four alternative remedies to choose from, and 24 replied. The most stringent alternative, "an agency that can produce coverage of an event and then order the news media to carry it," was chosen by five respondents (20.8 per cent). None chose the second harshest, "an agency that can order the news media to give coverage of an event." The third harshest, "an agency that establishes guidelines for the news media in regards to what events should be carried" drew seven (29.2 per cent) and the softest measure, "an agency that reviews and rates news media performance and publishes its findings" was selected by per cent). A significant relationship ( $p = 0.014$ ) existed between specific medium of choice and the harshness of the remedy preferred, with

radio selectors choosing the harshest method, newspaper and television choosers opting for the third harshest, and multi-media uses selecting the least harsh.

The same 27 respondents, having selected an agency, were asked to choose from five alternative means of controlling the agency. Fifty per cent (11) of the 22 replying preferred "a news media group formed for this purpose," while 22.7 per cent (5) selected "a community group formed for this purpose." Three respondents chose the federal government, two the provincial government, and one the appropriate municipal government. The pattern of replies remained when subjects were categorized by which medium they felt most often gave inadequate coverage, with never fewer than two-thirds opting for media or community groups as agency controllers. Despite the small number of subjects fitting into the categories of the second "streaming" question and its subsidiaries, it appears that, as with the first "streaming" question and its follow-ups, even those most critical of the media generally select non-governmental, or non-official, means of control of the press.

The specific medium of preference mentioned above was elicited from all respondents, which 147 (72.4 per cent) making a choice. Fifty-two (35.3 per cent of those respondents) selected the newspaper, 37 (25 per cent) television, 31 (21 per cent) multiple media and 27 (18.4 per cent) radio.

The bald finding that a large proportion of survey respondents consistently favor control of the press needs to be modified, if the indications in this study can be generalized to any extent: the situation isn't a public outcry for ironclad control by government. One senses in the present survey's replies and comments a sense of unease with the news media, shallowly based in objections to specific news stories which typically have transcended the individual's sense of good taste. The remedies seen as suitable most often, even by those with specific complaints, are for the media to accept the help of the community in setting standards or to set their own houses in order. Those who sensed that they were missing something in the media specified topics of individual interest and no evidence of a feeling of conspiracy of suppression emerged. These conclusions are fortified by replies to a series of six questions about certain kinds of news which respondents were asked if they liked to read or listen to. A majority of those replying (65 per cent or 131 respondents) replied they did not like to read about "details of people's private lives," 51 per cent (103) did not like "details of violent crime," while a majority like to read or watch "details of actions by terrorists or fringe groups," (62 per cent or 125), information embarrassing to the government (73 per cent or 148), background information on political, social or cultural events (81 per cent or 165), and a reporter's commentary or opinion (67 per cent or 135). While these answers probably reflect to some extent the

respondents' feelings of what they ought to want to read or not read, rather than the reality of readership, they do indicate indirectly a lack of substantive pattern, except for matters of taste, in material objected to.

In summary, the results of this survey indicate that freedom of the press is not an absolute or objective principle in the public mind because it is based on a number of value and reality judgments. They further suggest that those who wish to see some measure of press control generally favor a relatively "soft" method, and that again principle is involved less than is offense taken at a specific news story, or the way it is handled. This in turn suggests some sort of longitudinal study which would examine the same respondents over a relatively extended period to ascertain the ebb and flow of their opinions on press freedom as a function of their perception of topics and styles which had offended them.

While it is still possible to worry about the proportion of respondents who do not share the journalists' absolute evaluation of pure press freedom, the results also indicate that makers of public policy in Canada and the United States might find themselves alone if they misread the public attitude and attempted to impose policy-based controls on the press. Indicated relational standards for restrictions on the press indicate the lack of public acceptance of universal values. In light of this, proposing a universal value would be a political act and as such the makers would eventually have to take sides.

#### Footnotes

1. Special Senate Committee on the Mass Media, *Mass Media Volume III: Good, Bad or Simply Inevitable?* Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970.
2. Eugene F. Shaw, "The Press and Its Freedom: A Pilot Study of an American Stereotype," *Journalism Quarterly*, 49:31-42, 60 (1972).
3. John d. Stevens, "Student Attitudes on Compulsory Access," *Journalism Quarterly*, 48: 136-7 (1971).
4. Lee B. Becker, Robin E. Cobbey and Idowu A. Sobowale, "Public Support for the Press," *Journalism Quarterly*, 55: 421-30 (1978).
5. Hazel Erskine, "The Polls: Opinions of the News Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34: 630-43 (1971).
6. Gerald L. Grotta, "Attitudes on Newspaper Accuracy and External Controls," *Journalism Quarterly*, 46: 757-59 (1969).
7. Special Senate Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
8. Lee B. Becker *et. al.*, *op. cit.*
9. Erwin L. Atwood and Kenneth Starck, "Effects of Community Press Councils, Real and Imagined," *Journalism Quarterly*, 49:230-38 (1972).

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